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# MONSIGNOR VILLAROSA

BY

POMPEO, DUKE LITTA

AUTHOR OF "THE SOUL OF A PRIEST"

*Litta - Visconti - Arese, Pompeo, duca*



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
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To  
THE MEMORY OF  
FATHER GEORGE TYRRELL, S.J.

THIS BOOK IS REVERENTLY  
INSCRIBED







### AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Varese (Italy) is not and never was an episcopal see; no Italian bishop ever was in his youth a soldier of Garibaldi; and no riots, as described, ever took place in Varese.*







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# Monsignor Villarosa

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## CHAPTER I

### THE STAR OF "THE THOUSAND"

THE sun was slowly sinking behind gorgeous masses of gold and purple clouds banked precipitously over the snowy mountains which encircle the Lombard highlands. Now and again a quivering arrow of vivid light, as if on mischief bent, played upon the silver locks and the gentle but thoughtful face of a man who sat by an open window of the episcopal villa of Casbenno, near the town of Varese. His black gown, edged with violet, and the costly amethyst cross upon his breast proclaimed him the Bishop, while the tapering fingers which held the letter engrossing his attention evidenced his birth and breeding. Suddenly the tense, earnest face relaxed; an amused smile, in which irony and pity were curiously blended, lit up his features, and, turning



from the massive desk in front of him, he gazed upon the lovely scenery of the lake and hills. As he feasted his soul upon its beauty, the expression of his sensitive face melted into one of profound tenderness. Evidently the landscape had for him an individuality which he regarded with a peculiar combination of passionate love and melancholy longing.

While he was thus lost in thought, another priest, heavy shouldered and loosely built, made his appearance. He stalked in with the clumsy tread of those born to follow the plough, but, notwithstanding his abrupt and noisy entrance, the Bishop continued to be thoroughly unconscious of his presence. To attract his attention the newcomer deliberately overturned a chair, which fell with a mighty crash on the mosaic floor.

"Mercy upon us! What's the matter?" testily expostulated the very much startled prelate. Then, seeing who it was, he went on in a pacified tone: "Don Paolino! Don Paolino! You always remind me of a cyclone! But it's all right—you have come in the nick of time. I have received a letter of great importance, upon which I wish to consult you."

"I imagined your Excellency would need me, and accordingly came without summons," the



priest replied in the harsh and guttural dialect of the Lombard hill-folk. He was far from prepossessing, with his coarse, sallow features and nondescript eyes, but the many shortcomings of his person were amply compensated by the shrewd and humorous expression of his big nose and mouth and by his dog-like devotion to his master. For more than thirty years Don Paolino Bosetti had been chaplain and private secretary to Monsignor Guido Villarosa, Bishop of Varese, and the gossiping clergy of the diocese were unable to explain the devoted attachment between these two seeming extremes.

The solution of the riddle was very simple: both had been born in the same village, Corgeno, which nestles between the high hills of Casale and the Lake of Varano. Villarosa was the lord of the manor, and Paolino the son of one of his tenant-farmers. The lad had grown under the eye of the master, who, to the surprise of every one, having entered Holy Orders, obtained almost immediately the position of Curato, or parish priest, of his own village, an unprecedented exception to the unwritten laws of ecclesiastical preferment. Villarosa had taught the lad to serve Mass, then, gradually attracted by his happy and affectionate temperament, had discovered in him a bright,



though simple, intelligence, together with a great ambition to learn. The boy was accordingly educated at the master's expense, and finally sent to the Seminario Arcivescovile, in Milan, for the wily Bosettis, by constant repetition, had badgered Paolino into an overpowering vocation for the Church. After the ordination, Villarosa had obtained for him the coadjutorship of Corgeno, and when later his noble patron accepted the see of Varese, the young priest, as a matter of course, followed his beloved master.

When Paolino was seated the Bishop read aloud the letter he had just been perusing: it came from the Curato of a remote mountain village, and was a most pitiable epistle, laboriously scrawled in an uneducated hand. The writer related a tedious story of disagreements and petty jealousies between a neighboring colleague and himself, which had lately culminated in the spreading of malicious and damaging reports concerning his reputation and morality. As the letter proceeded it became more and more complicated and obscure, the main issue being entirely forgotten in a maze of circumstantial evidence of the most trivial description. It appeared, however, that some years before the writer had enticed to his service the cook of his present enemy, and



that this indelicate action was the *fons et origo belli*.

Don Paolino listened to the weary recital, venting his feelings by sundry groans and occasionally pursing up his big lips as if he were going to whistle. But at the end of the letter, when the writer begged the Bishop to rebuke the calumniator as those living in glass houses could not afford to throw stones, the secretary restrained himself no longer.

"Phew-w-w-w! What an ass! What an ass, I say!" he cried in his loudest voice, and as Monsignore looked up, evidently surprised and a little displeased at the sally, Don Paolino continued argumentatively: "What business had this fool to wheedle a good cook from a colleague's home? Of course the other is indignant, and as in these parts we never forget or forgive, there's trouble! What does your Excellency intend to do? If I were you, I'd wash my hands of the whole silly affair, and let the two fight it out, for it's clear that one is about as bad as the other!"

The moral issue underlying the dispute did not seem to worry Don Paolino: evidently he took it for granted that indiscretions had been committed on both sides, and was neither shocked nor grieved at the thought. It never struck his very relative



conception of morality that a great ethical importance could be attached to what he considered merely as the fatal consequences of sex. But Monsignore, though accustomed to the elemental views of his secretary, could not refrain from indignantly reminding him of the vows all priests must take—aye, and keep, cost what it may! Paolino's mind was obdurate on that point: to him the Bishop's severe reproof was the outcome of the superhuman saintliness of his master, whose perfection was to be admired and wondered at, though it remained quite unattainable to common clay. Thereupon, he expressed this opinion so imperturbably that Monsignore had to laugh outright, and said:

"Well, well! Just order them both to appear before me. You, Paolino, are nothing else but a hard-hearted sceptical sinner, and, though as good and pure as any priest needs be, you affect to disbelieve that others may live just as you do!"

"Oh! I? I have no merit whatever about it. With me it's constitutional. Monsignore knows that women and I——" Paolino emphatically asserted.

"S-s-s-s-s!" the Bishop hastily interrupted. "You are incorrigible! I blush to hear you!"

It was true: the old gentleman had flushed rosy



red. His silver-white curls, which (with no little vanity, it was whispered) he wore rather long, made a most becoming frame to his clear-cut features, his delicate skin, and large brown eyes, remarkably childlike and trustful. Though nearing the ominous "threescore and ten," he had not lost the lithe elegance of his figure nor his guileless simplicity. It was impossible to approach him without falling under his magnetic charm, which derived its power from the fact that it was totally natural and unconsciously exercised.

A resolute and sincere enemy of all shams, Guido Villarosa's priestly life had been so noble and exemplary that the poisoned breath of scandal, always ready to sully even the purest, had never found one vulnerable spot in his armor of virtue. On that account, no one understood how, with such eminent qualities combined with his great name and large fortune, he had not rapidly risen to the highest ecclesiastical honors. Why on earth was he not Archbishop of Milan, and, of course, Cardinal? No one could tell. Villarosa himself was silent on this topic, and the few busy-bodies who had dared to broach it never forgot the ominous flash of his eyes nor the haughty fashion with which he had cut short their leading



questions. It was evident that, underlying his delicate sweetness, the historic "Villarosa temper" lurked still, not wholly overcome by the last scion of that fine old race of warriors.

The conversation then drifted into another channel: Monsignore's nephew and godson, Guido Calvello, was expected next day, to spend at the villa his eight weeks' furlough. They were joyfully looking forward to this visit, and the Bishop spoke so tenderly of his "boy" that no one could doubt he was the very apple of his eye. Young Guido was the only child of Villarosa's sister, who, unfortunately, had died at his birth. Her husband had remarried, as expected, for he had lost his lovely wife when not yet thirty-five. Thoroughly upright and conscientious, Count Calvello was, however, very opinionated and rather selfish, and never pardoned the boy for having innocently caused the death of his mother. Later, the father's second marriage, his many other children, novel and different affections and cares, had widened the breach.

Villarosa, then Curato of Corgeno, had insisted that the child should be entrusted to his care. A nurse became indispensable, and this was most inconvenient in Turin, the home of the Calvellos. The young widower had no near female relatives,



and was in no state of mind to be bothered by nurses and babies. So the tiny Guido was handed over to his uncle, and brought to live in Corgeno. The ancestral home of the Villarosas then witnessed the unusual sight of a priest sedulously tending a nursling, and many a stranger passing before its gates must have smiled and wondered at the distinguished-looking ecclesiastic carefully holding a sunshade over a lusty baby tumbling about on a rug spread over the lawn in front of the old house. But all who knew Villarosa were neither shocked nor surprised: it was "just him all over," and what more could be said?

The "boy" had ever since lived with his uncle, who supervised his early training with the most intelligent devotion. Don Paolino had naturally become the child's willing slave, his playmate, and, later, his assistant teacher. When Guido developed into a tall, strong, and healthy lad his disposition for a military career became self-evident: the fighting blood of the Villarosas was demonstrated by his talent in marshalling the boys of Corgeno into a band, whose exploits against adjoining villages soon distressed and terrified his uncle. He scolded and even seriously punished the child each time he returned from these hazardous expeditions, tattered and triumph-



ant, but it was all useless, so, after much deliberation, it was decided that Guido should be sent to the Military Institute in Milan for his education. At college the boy did extremely well: from the first he took the head of his class, and soon became a prime favorite with his teachers and companions. As he had a good scientific and mathematical turn of mind, Guido chose the Horse Artillery, and in due time passed out lieutenant, being destined to the crack regiment stationed in Milan.

Guido fully kept the promise he had given: he had grown to be a manly, fearlessly sincere and upright gentleman, passionately attached to his profession. He had kept aloof from the vices of his age and class by an inborn detestation for all that is low, and also by a genuine religious sentiment sedulously but unobtrusively fostered in the boy's heart by his uncle. In spite of this, he was by no means a self-righteous prig; on the contrary, he was brimming over with vitality and fun, the first to get into a scrape, and the first also to know how to get out of it. And the ladies of the Milanese "smart set" were all smiles and advances for the handsome and wealthy young officer, who was by no means a laggard in taking full advantage of his opportunities.

Such was "the boy" whom the two priests



expected so anxiously, and for whose comfort they were planning. Monsignore was just discussing the quantity of hay needed for Guido's horses when he abruptly stopped short; his sharp ears (or was it not rather the intuition of a loving heart?) had perceived a faint rumble of wheels. In a second he was convinced that it must be a cab from the railway-station, and that his nephew had anticipated his arrival by twenty-four hours.

"It's Guido! It's Guido!" he cried in a wild flutter of joy, notwithstanding the obstinate denials of Don Paolino, who, in his heart, was sore at the thought that he was not then in the hall, the first to greet the welcome guest. With juvenile alacrity Villarosa rose from his seat, when rapid steps and the clatter of a sword checked him; the door was tumultuously burst open, a tall, handsome young officer rushed into the study, and, without ceremony, fairly hugged the stately prelate.

"My Ziggio! My Ziggio! I stole a march upon you! I am here not to move for eight whole weeks! Isn't that good, eh? Don Paolino, as soon as I have done with Ziggio, you are going to catch it!"

Monsignore could not find words nor even the breath to utter them; the rapture of seeing his "boy," of feeling the loving pressure of those



strong arms, was overpowering. He could only caress the bronzed cheeks of the officer with his trembling fingers, but nothing could have been more eloquent than his silence. Young Guido, however, instinctively aware that a too prolonged emotion might harm his highly strung and delicate relative, gently led him back to his arm-chair, and, having carefully ensconced him in its capacious depths, grasped Don Paolino's hand, shaking it vigorously, and demanded a full report of the Roccolo, as he knew that the snaring of wild birds with nets was the *grande passion* of his old friend. So Monsignore in a while regained his usual composure, and chatted gaily about domestic topics, occasionally inquiring about his nephew's doings.

Suddenly Don Paolino, looking thoroughly disgusted, explained: "And to think that we cannot even dine by ourselves the very first day of your arrival! Isn't it provoking, your Excellency? We have Don Felice, of La Cascinetta, the Prevosto of Somma, and the Curato of Casbenno! Pah-h-h! What a nuisance!"

Villarosa made a wry face; he had forgotten all about this dinner, but Guido, who did not relish the prospect, chimed in: "What! My pet aversions? That black-faced, sinister individual, Ranzi, and that mountainous glutton, Tortoni, not



to mention that unbearable idiot, Don Eusebio? It's a nice home-coming, and no mistake! What on earth induced you to invite them, Ziggio?" This pet name "Ziggio," which sounded so frequently and rather peculiarly on the lips of the stalwart officer, had been coined by him, when, still a lisping baby, he stumbled over the perplexing sounds of "Zio Guido": he had used it ever since, and it had become extremely dear to both of them.

Monsignore, as in duty bound, gently rebuked them for their lack of hospitality, adding that it was very wrong for any one to entertain prejudices against fellow-men simply because their faces failed to suit one's taste. Quite penitently they listened to the little sermon, but when Guido blurted out suddenly that notwithstanding all he said, Monsignore was quite as much annoyed as they were, the old gentleman, in spite of himself, had to laugh outright.

After a while the Bishop escorted Guido to his quarters, and leaving him to his toilet, went down to the reception-rooms on the ground-floor, a stately suite of apartments, decorated in the florid style of the eighteenth century. As he came through the hall he distinctly heard the booming voice of the Prevosto, the steely snap of Don



Felice's tones, and the high-pitched, squeaky tenor of the Curato of Casbenno. Unconsciously Monsignore shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say that he must grin and bear it, and so he entered the drawing-room, courteously excusing himself to his guests for not being present to receive them, but the unexpected arrival of his nephew for the holidays had detained him upstairs.

The three priests chorused their delight at the news, and Don Felice, in his grating voice, remarked: "What an exemplary young man is the Contino—quite exemplary! He prefers to come to this house of penance and prayer rather than amuse himself in the gay cities as other men of his age and profession!"

Monsignore looked at Don Felice with a whimsical twinkle in his eye, and then softly replied: "I trust that this is a house of prayer; as to its being a house of penance, let us hope it is not quite as you say, for surely none of you would relish it just at the dinner hour! Is it not so, my dear Prevosto?"

"Per Bacco, I hope not!" the Prevosto boomed out with an explosion of laughter which shook him all over. "His Excellency's cook has nothing to do with penances fortunately, and you, Don Felice, know it quite as well as I do!"



The conversation rolled on, sustained with admirable patience by the host, who did not seem, however, to relish its subjects overmuch, for, in spite of his efforts to lift it to a more intellectual level, it invariably sank back into the pettiest clerical small talk when it did not, through the venomous insinuations of Don Felice, become tainted with scandal of the most objectionable description. This, fortunately, was sternly cut short by Monsignore, who more than once had to control himself not to upbraid his guest for the slanders he attempted to disseminate.

After a while Don Paolino hurried in and took at once a leading part in the conversation, thus giving his master, much to his relief, a badly needed rest. The secretary's advent, however, injected a polemical tone into the discussion, for he pitched into Don Felice as soon as he broached some tasty *on dit*, and they at once were engaged in a battle royal, underlined at each of its phases by the guffaws of the Prevosto and the joyful squeaks of Don Eusebio. Finally, Guido having joined them, the butler announced that the dinner was served, and with the Bishop on his nephew's arm at the head of the procession, they paired off to the dining-room, a fine hall with four French windows opening on to the lovely old-time garden,



one mass of blossoming plants, and now quietly sleeping in the bright moonlight. The table, laid for six, was a picture of refined elegance with the costly damasked linen and sparkling glass, while the historic Villarosa silver glittered in profusion everywhere.

The dinner itself was perfection: quite substantial enough to satisfy the appetite of the Prevosto, who guzzled conscientiously, and of Don Felice, who, though less omnivorous, tasted everything with the sour grimace of a dyspeptic epicure bent upon detecting culinary blunders. During the opening courses, as is generally the case, conversation lagged, but the young officer very soon revived it. He mischievously decoyed the Curato of Casbenno into it for the sake of hearing that worthy stumble over the difficult words he affected, and this with such a success of hilarity that Monsignore more than once was obliged to frown expressively to recall Guido to order. But Don Eusebio was fairly launched, and nothing could stop him, so he rambled on and on, indiscriminately holding forth *de omni re scibili* until Don Paolino impatiently cut him short by addressing Guido:

“Do you know that the Villa Meroni has been rented at last? Three days ago I saw large vans of furniture on its grounds.”



Unabashed, Don Eusebio at once took up the debate: "Yes, Contino, it has been let to a lady, a widow, I think, by name Leoni, or something like it. I got a glimpse of her, but as she was *hernestically* veiled and in an automobile I cannot tell you what she looks like."

This piece of news was by no means pleasing to the Bishop, to whom the building for speculation on the adjacent grounds overlooking his garden had ever been a very sore subject, so, after the laugh produced by Don Eusebio's *hernestically* veiled lady, the subject was dropped by tacit consent.

Finally the dinner ended. Don Paolino, well aware that his beloved master was longing to have a private chat with his nephew undisturbed by their cackle, loudly proposed a game of billiards, and accordingly the four priests departed in high glee, while Monsignore, ebony cane in hand and leaning upon Guido's arm, slowly walked to a rose-covered arbor which, from a commanding height, overlooked the high-road and the lake, and there they sat down together. The air was balmy and soft; the full moon filled the beautiful landscape with its rays, and made the lazy ripples of the lake sparkle as molten silver. For a while both were silent, enjoying the lovely view, and,



above all, the feeling of being once more together. Then Guido, as in a monologue, talked by snatches of his life during the last months:

"I have worked—no, not too hard, Ziggio, no danger of that! I raced the bay mare you gave me, and won a fine cup. The stately Duchess of Terralba, who presented the prizes, said I must be sure to tell you not to forget her in your prayers—looked as if she needed them badly, eh? She added that you must be a terribly rigid uncle, and as I laughed she remarked that she had visited you in the spring and never would forget it, either, so I suppose——"

He stopped short as Monsignore, well aware of what the "boy" meant, had uttered a "Guido!" replete with warning. Unabashed, however, the young officer went on:

"It must have been a choice gallery of souvenirs! How you must have blushed, my poor Ziggio! I can see you now!" Then, detecting a more serious danger signal in his uncle's eyes, he at once proceeded to mollify him: "Speaking of my work, we have had lately some very interesting lectures at the military club. One was about the campaign of 'The Thousand' in Sicily. They handed us a printed list of their names, with those of the killed and wounded, and, do you know,



Ziggio, I found an extraordinary coincidence. One of them is called just as you—'Guido Villarosa, dangerously wounded at Palermo.' Who can he be? We stayed prudently at home . . . we never fought for Italy. I fear, in fact, that our family was very much on the wrong side!"

As he uttered these words in a careless and somewhat bitter tone, he instinctively looked up, and, to his dismay, saw his uncle towering over him passionately brandishing his cane; the Bishop had turned deathly pale, and his laboured breath came and went by gasps. Thoroughly frightened, Guido would have asked what ailed him, but, with an imperious gesture, Monsignore silenced him.

"It is best you should know, boy," Villarosa said in a low, distinct, thrilling voice. "Yes, at once. We Villarosas on the wrong side? We stay-at-homes? No, no! The living one did his duty! Look!" and convulsively the Bishop tore open his cassock and shirt. In the moonlight Guido saw a deep, angry-looking scar on his uncle's chest, and, close to it, on a thin chain, the five-pointed "Star of The Thousand."

With a stifled cry of awe, of joy, of surprise, and of admiration Guido leaped to his feet, a perfect storm of question on his lips, but the old man, recovering his self-possession, silenced him again,



"I will tell you all, but not to-night: I could not now. In the morning you will hear my life's story. Lead me to my room. Inform our guests that I felt tired and unwell, and ask them to excuse me. Now, come!"

Guido silently obeyed. Ascending a private staircase, they reached Monsignore's bedroom without meeting any one. At the door, impulsively, the young officer bent slowly his knee before the Bishop, and kissed his delicate hand as if it were something sacred. Monsignore lovingly caressed the upturned brow, murmuring a blessing, and without another word they parted.

Early next morning Monsignore celebrated his usual Mass in the chapel of the villa, a simple and unostentatious *oratorio*, unadorned save by a great crucifix on the tiny altar and an admirable picture of Mary Magdalen at the feet of the Saviour. The bareness of this chapel was one of the chief grievances entertained by the Zelanti, as the over-zealous faction of the Italian clergy is called, for they resented the absence of stained-glass windows and gaudily colored statues.

At the Mass, served by Don Paolino, only the inmates of the household were present: Guido, who on account of "his many duties, military and otherwise," was not much of a church-goer when



in town, never failed to be there when at Casbenno, knowing that his absence would grieve his uncle, even if he never mentioned the fact. And after the startling discovery of Monsignore's past, the young officer felt more than ever an overflowing tenderness for the man who not only was an example of those noble virtues he had been taught to revere, but at the same time one of Italy's purest heroes. That none of the Villarosas had taken part in the wars and revolutions of the Risorgimento had been for young Guido the source of many sterile and bitter regrets, and his uncle's revelation had now filled the boy's heart with elation and pride. After Mass, the Bishop, still very pale, and bearing visible traces of a sleepless night, was closeted a long time with Guido. Calmly, almost cheerfully, he revealed to his nephew the history of his life in terms so quiet and unostentatious that the narrative became wondrously dramatic and poignant, and remained indelibly impressed in Guido's memory.

The Bishop's father, Conte Ottavio Villarosa, by his own choice an officer in the Italian regiments of the Austrian army, while garrisoned at Linz, had married an Austrian lady, and had been killed in December, 1850, during an obscure encounter with one of the still active bands of Hungarian "rebels," in distant Transylvania.



The Bishop was then nine years old; his sister was born seven months after her father's death, so they both had been educated by their mother, an enthusiastic Austrian patriot, to revere Kaiser Franz-Joseph and hate the Italian revolutionaries. But, unfortunately for her, the young widow could not possibly return, as it was her one great desire, to her native Linz, for she was a portionless orphan, had absolutely no relatives, and the very large fortune of her husband consisted exclusively of landed estates in Lombardy. So in Lombardy she needs must live. Her boy was sent to a good school in Milan, with the understanding that as soon as he reached the prescribed age he would enter the Theresianum in Vienna, being entitled to a place in this very exclusive and aristocratic military institute as a nobleman and the son of an Austrian officer fallen on the field.

But the poor lady had not reckoned with the overpowering breath of new life filtering through the length and breadth of Italy. At the school her boy frequented teachers and pupils were all without exception ardent patriots, and the fact that the new boy was the son of an Italian killed voluntarily fighting the Hungarians, and of an Austrian mother, caused him to be considered almost as a pariah. The boy's parentage was



continually thrown in his face as an insult. His fierce, passionate temper involved him in daily fights with his comrades, though his great pride prevented him from complaining to his mother of the persecution to which he was subjected. She, poor woman, had many troubles of her own. She was, of course, boycotted by almost all the Milanese nobility, and her remarkable beauty, together with an extremely religious and retiring disposition, greatly intensified by the loss of her husband, prevented her from frequenting the Austrian garrison society, as the free, audacious, and not too restrained courtships of the officers greatly frightened and distressed her.

Unexpectedly, a young teacher of Guido's school, Carlo Bonoris by name, interested and touched by the child's Ishmael-like isolation, patiently and lovingly undertook to explain to the poor boy the causes of this treatment. To the child this came as a revelation: a new world, new aspirations and hopes were disclosed to his wondering eyes, but the evolution of his mind was gradual and so slow that he was hardly aware of it. By the time Guido was fourteen, the change in his ideas was complete, and even deeper than he knew. He felt this in all its bitter intensity when he remembered that next year he must enter the



Theresianeum. The poor boy was then confronted with the terrible problem of confessing his new feelings to his mother, an Austrian born, who, very naturally, would resent this unexpected shattering of all her hopes and ideals as an unpardonable insult.

The tremendous dilemma in which Villarosa found himself, wholly unprepared and alone, presented no loophole of escape. It was clearly an uncompromising choice between his love for his mother and his love for Italy; for seemingly unending months he underwent in silence a torture which might well have killed even a stronger temperament, racking his brain in the hopeless quest of a solution. No one suspected the formidable struggle which took place in the depths of that boyish soul, and he withstood the ordeal without even a friend in whom to confide his agony.

Suddenly, as the time was getting very short and a decision imperative, a ray of light pierced the awful darkness through which he was groping: why not study for the Church? From his earliest childhood he had been reared in the deepest religious sentiments, and an inborn vein of mysticism gave more than apparent excuse to his purpose. Of course then he had a very hazy and confused conception of what priesthood stood for, and he freely admitted that his decision had been



undoubtedly due to the anxiety of escaping the Austrian military school without the dreaded ordeal of proclaiming his patriotic aspirations; but he also added that, allowing even for his youth and solitude, he had committed then one of the gravest sins of his life, the vocation he had pretended to feel being nothing else but a sham and a cowardly lie. The fact that he was a mere boy, without friends or advisers, did not minimise in the least his guilt; but at that time he very rapidly convinced himself that this vocation was most genuine and ardent.

The widowed Contessa, though undoubtedly very much disappointed, was by no means disposed to resist the passionately expressed aspirations of her son: after the Kaiser's service, she knew of no more desirable or nobler calling than that of the Church. Mother and son had long and earnest conversations for over a week, during which it was an easy task to convince, and even fire with enthusiasm, her simple and plastic soul, so the Contessa, after cautioning him against the uncontrollable temper he inherited from his Villarosa ancestry, easily and readily gave her consent. Thus, without opposition, Guido Villarosa entered the Seminario Arcivescovile of Milan, and began the studies of his chosen career.



He found there a very different atmosphere to that of his first school, and if he had imagined for a moment that he would be able to combine religion and patriotism, his dream did not last for long. The pupils might have been patriotic enough in their aspirations, those at least who were capable of any other than those of the flesh, but the strictest of disciplines prevented any outward demonstrations, and most of their superiors were the fiercest and most irreconcilable opponents of the country's unification. So the youth was compelled to keep his feelings to himself.

But fortunately his old teacher and friend visited him frequently, as the Contessa, who now resided permanently at Corgeno and was acquainted with Bonoris, had begged him to look after her son during the shorter holidays. The intimacy deriving from this intercourse intensified Guido's patriotism, but, on the other hand, the years in the Seminario Arcivescovile strengthened his artificial vocation, as habit and imitation are the greatest moulders of the soul, especially when very young.

In 1859, the war and the liberation of Lombardy found young Villarosa a strong, healthy deacon of eighteen, who had already taken the inferior orders and had been tonsured, so advanced in his



studies and so much thought of by his teachers that, had it not been for the canonic impediment of age, he could have been ordained. When the victorious Franco-Piedmontese troops entered Milan, even the sleepy old Seminario seemed convulsed by an overpowering burst of patriotism: its inmates stood before the peculiar-looking gate on the Corso and madly cheered the soldiers as they marched by, Guido the most frantically of them all. His exultation knew no bounds, but the sudden thought that his poor mother at Corgeno must be distracted over the defeat of her compatriots cast a profound gloom over his joy.

As the summer vacation began just when Milan was liberated, Guido went to take his seat in the diligence for Varese, the only means of reaching Corgeno, as there was no railway then. Turning a corner he almost collided with a soldier in the well-known uniform of the Cacciatori delle Alpi, or Garibaldians. It was his friend Bonoris, of whom he had completely lost sight during some months, and his bandaged arm proved that he had been in the thick of the fray. In a few glowing words Bonoris narrated his campaign, spoke of *the* General with worshipping enthusiasm, and finally asked Guido if now he was not going to throw off the cassock, as there were still many more battles



to be fought for Italy, and he was just the boy according to Garibaldi's heart.

Guido departed with head and heart afire. During the whole of the slow journey he tortured his brain, seeking helplessly the way of liberating himself. At Corgeno he found his mother sadder, more despondent, and more ailing than ever. The defeat of the Austrians, the triumph of the hated Piedmontese, and the conviction that Lombardy, for the moment at least, was lost to her Emperor, had totally overcome her. One only consolation remained: her son had providentially chosen the ecclesiastical career, and thus would escape serving the new Government. The sight of this despairing woman and her morbid frame of mind irretrievably shattered all of Guido's plans. Clearly, to disclose his secret might have killed his mother. He must, then, go on hiding the truth from her. Was this a second sin? Perhaps not, but it was, at any rate, the fatal consequence of his previous cowardice.

The holidays dragged along, and early in autumn Guido returned to the seminary. The ensuing months were one long, cruel fight between duty and inclination. The air itself was pregnant with a warlike enthusiasm, and yet he was bound by his oath and by his love for his mother to languish



in his self-inflicted fetters. But each day the temptation grew stronger, almost irresistible. Bonoris, who often visited him and was wholly unconscious of the youth's mental struggle, told him of all the hopes and plans of the patriots, thus adding fuel to the fire. Guido, forced to hide his doubts and anguish from all eyes, was on the brink of utter despair.

One memorable day, a Sunday of the end of April, Bonoris, as usual, came to visit him. Really it was to say "good-bye"; a few days more and he would be in Genoa, ready to follow his General, who was secretly preparing an expedition in aid of the Sicilians, once more in arms against the hated Bourbons. Was it not glorious to go and fight for Unity? The fierce enthusiasm which made his voice tremble, the ardent words maddened the boy; Guido forgot his mother, his oath, his duty, and passionately implored Bonoris to take him too. The older man had never guessed that such would be the effect of his words: Guido, no doubt, was and would remain a priest. Bonoris, much troubled and distressed, demurred, pointing out the grave consequences of a rash decision. But all was useless, and as, after all, Bonoris considered that he was acting patriotically and wisely by snatching Guido from a calling for which



he had scant sympathy, he finally consented. In a few brief sentences it was settled that Guido, two days later, should slip out of the Seminario, hastening to his friend's lodgings near by, where he would find clothes and a few thousand lire, gladly lent by a bill-discounter to the heir of the Villarosas. All went smoothly, and without any difficulty they were able to join a group of Lombards hurrying to Genoa. These at once nicknamed Guido *il pretino* ("the little priest"), on account of his visible tonsure and shy demeanor, and under that name and no other he was henceforth known. Accepted as a volunteer, the *pretino* was one of "The Thousand" who sailed from Quarto on May 4, 1860.

From that hour Guido lost almost all track of time and events and lived in a wonderful dream. The landing at Marsala, the march amid the wild enthusiasm of the islanders, he could remember but confusedly. On the ever glorious 14th of May he and Bonoris, with Carini's company, found themselves in the foremost skirmishing line under the fierce fire of the Neapolitan troops entrenched on the formidable heights of Calatafimini. They were among the first who ascended step by step that gigantic stairway of rocks. At the last spurt, still unscathed and together, they



found themselves in a small hollow separated from the rest and almost hemmed in by half a dozen men. A terrible hand-to-hand encounter ensued: Bonoris fell, never to rise again, pierced by numberless wounds. Guido, maddened at the loss of his friend, drunk with the fierce lust of battle, and suddenly endowed with superhuman strength, single-handed bayoneted the three men besetting him with such murderous energy and flaming eyes that the rest turned and fled. His comrades found him begrimed, exhausted, and covered with blood, trying to infuse life in his friend's corpse. They carried the *pretino* shoulder high to Garibaldi who complimented him as one of the bravest of that band of heroes.

Immediately after the battle his tremendous nervous excitement died out, and the loss of Bonoris plunged him into despair. His shattered nerves filled his brain with visions: the distorted features of the strong men he had killed, their awful death-throes, even the feeling of their warm blood spurting over him, haunted him incessantly. He became haggard and wan, almost spectral, and thus unconsciously struggled through the exhausting marches and countermarches by which Garibaldi reached the gates of Palermo. How he had resisted the bodily fatigue and mental anguish



was incomprehensible, but now he attributed it to God's will so that he should atone for his sins.

At the storming of the Ponte dell'Ammiraglio a shell knocked him down with his chest gashed open by a terrible wound, and he was left for dead on the spot. At this point of his story the Bishop was silent for a moment, then he continued: "When I re-acquired my senses I found myself in one of the beds of the Palermo hospital, alive by a sheer miracle, so weak that I could not move: for two months I had hovered 'twixt life and death. The chaplain, hearing of my return to consciousness, came at once to confess me, for I might have died at any moment. Then, as in a flash, the whole past came back to me. I had infringed my oath, I had disobeyed, offended, grieved my mother, and after swearing to be meek and pious, I had killed, ay, killed with mine own hands! All of this I told the priest in broken whispers. The austere, rigid man, unspeakably horrified, absolved me conditionally, as I was in imminent danger of death, but, if I lived, I must return to the Seminario and submit to any penance that might be pronounced upon me. At my request the priest wrote to my mother, interceding for my pardon: in fear and expectation I waited for the result. Two weeks elapsed, and yet no reply. I was



slowly recovering, and could sit up in bed for an hour or two when one day the chaplain came, pale, grave, almost threatening. Silently he handed me a letter. It was written by our agent. Truly, my punishment had overtaken me! When my mother had heard of my flight from the Seminario, and whereto bound, she had fallen senseless to the ground, and, never recovering consciousness again, had died on the 14th of May, almost at the same hour in which I was wallowing in the blood of my fellow-men! 'Qui de gladio ferit, de gladio perit' was written on the wall before me in letters of fire, and I fell into a dead faint. After another tremendous struggle for life I again recovered, and returned to Corgeno, the prey of remorse and despair. On my mother's grave I wrestled with the temptation to enter the world and assume the position to which my name and fortune entitled me. But the thought of my mother, killed by me, as ruthlessly as I had bayoneted my foes, could not be stilled. After six months of this torture, I threw myself at the feet of the Archbishop of Milan to abide by his decision. I must return to the Church, and, as no one had connected my name with 'The Thousand,' nothing would be said. After a year's rigid penance, I was absolved and ordained, and obtained my request to be sent



as Curato to Corgeno. But my love for Italy never grew less; I was offered high preferments in Rome but refused them all; I could not join the opposers of Italy's union. Later an Archbishop of Milan, who loved Italy as well as I did, prevailed upon me to accept this see. Higher I will never ascend. I am marked as a 'Liberal' at Rome. Though the world generally ignores that I am the Guido Villarosa of 'The Thousand,' at Rome they know it well, and that is sufficient. This is my secret which I now confide to you. I have sought to expiate; have I succeeded? It was only your speaking of us Villarosas as 'stay-at-homes' that fired my wicked temper . . . and so I thought it wiser to tell you all."

The young officer listened to the Bishop with profound sympathy. The description of the fight had kept him breathless, but he could not fathom the subtle causes of his uncle's decision to return to the Church. At any rate, the confession served to strengthen even more the bonds of love which united Monsignor Villarosa and his nephew.



## CHAPTER II

### THE BAY OF A HOUND

AN uneventful week passed by and then Monsignore must visit the prosperous village of Gavirate, at the other end of the lake, as he did every year. A new church was to be consecrated with the attendance of a large number of priests and a vast crowd of the faithful. So, one morning early, the neat but quietly appointed landau, with coachman and footman in the dark-green Villarosa liveries, was ready for the ten-mile drive, and the Bishop accompanied by Don Paolino departed, leaving Guido alone in possession.

At the Prevostura or Rural Deanery of Gavirate over thirty priests were congregated, and the Prevosto, a meek little man, with a cast in one eye and greatly disfigured by pock-marks, was busily entertaining his guests. A noisy hubbub of conversation buzzed in the large but uncomfortable-looking hall, the snappy tones of Don Felice Ranzi often rising above the din.



The company had automatically divided itself into three groups. In one corner a dozen or so of the younger clergy were hanging, so to say, from the lips of the Curato of Lomazzo, Don Davide Capelletti, already famous for his fluent, aggressive eloquence, his rather bright intelligence, and unbounded ambition. He was holding forth about the most burning questions of the day, freely dipping into politics.

"It is all very right and proper that, on general principles, we should follow the big bugs of Rome, although—humph! But, as to our local affairs, we are acquainted with the existing conditions a thousand times better than they are. We cannot allow them to lead us eternally, as if we were babies! We must be of our time, eschew dead issues, and mix more in active political life, or we are certainly done for. Let the past bury its dead. We are alive, and why should we not rule Italy yet?"

At this point one of his friends, poking him suddenly in the ribs, remarked in a cautious undertone to look out for "that spy, Ranzi," who was hovering around, and might get him into trouble.

"Into trouble!" Don Davide sniffed contemptuously. "Why, he is welcome to listen. I have nothing to hide! Only a few days ago I challenged



the Socialists of my parts to a debate, and you all know how keen and clever they are; well, I hit them so hard that the following Sunday two-thirds of them came to Mass. And the result is that on many topics, such as land laws and class legislation, we are in perfect accord. The workers are shamefully treated, that's positive, and as there is a formidable movement preparing in their midst, why should not we, the pastors of the flock, be the heads and moving spirits of it all?"

In another corner of the room the Prevosto Ranzi, and most of the older priests, were conversing on very different subjects; the hundredth recital of the same old clerical saws, twisted and turned, over and over again. These men were certainly not agitated by social or political problems; they belonged to another school and to another epoch with a very inferior instruction and no education worth mentioning. As long as they were allowed to take life easily and lazily, without worrying a jot about the high ethical questions involved in their pastoral duties, they were content to jog along in their merely animal lives. The Church, for them, was a profession in which there was mighty little to do, and which enabled them to rule despotically in their restricted circle. So when Don Felice returned to them he



was greatly nettled by what he had heard, and silenced them all by venomously murmuring:

“That Don Davide, with his speeches and public debates, he will make a mess of it, sooner or later! His Excellency will treat him as he richly deserves, I’m sure. His aspirations and those of a lot of low, ragged demagogues, forsooth! We priests must ever sustain the landlords, their secular rights are identical with ours. And if that young fool and his worthy friends are ever allowed to take the upper hand, we shall all be done for and ruined!”

The other priests chorused assent, but in subdued voices, as they all feared the aggressiveness of Don Davide, no less than the malice of Don Felice.

The third knot of priests was composed only of a few men of various ages, bearing all one common stamp, more instinctively felt than seen, an indescribable something, repulsive and formidable, as if a sinister and mysterious influence lurked behind their commonplace persons. These Zelanti, as they were called, affected to be more clerical than the Pope himself, and their conversation turned on nothing but pilgrimages, beatifications, the attitude of his Holiness in his controversy with France, and the everlasting



infamy of the Pope's despoilers. They spoke of their Bishop too, casting their eyes to heaven as if in silent intercession, and unwilling to express their entire judgment. Quieter and more unostentatious than the others, they obviously looked the most dangerous.

These three groups symbolised very effectively the forces at work within the body of the Italian clergy: on one side, the Christian Democrats, active, aggressive, and modern; on the other, the Zelanti, unscrupulous, fierce, and mysterious, the pawns of the Great Company; between the two extremes, the large, amorphous mass of the illiterate, uneducated clergy, whose motto was "Quieta non movere," and who feared and resented any troublesome agitation in their lives, from whatever quarter it came.

The hubbub rose louder and louder, when suddenly a red-coated verger rushed in, whispered something to the Prevosto, and rushed out again, hurriedly followed by him. Monsignore had evidently arrived, and the noisy babel of voices was silenced at once; a minute later, the Bishop, escorted by the Prevosto, all bows and scrapes, and by Don Paolino, entered, a pleasant smile on his handsome face, and sat in an arm-chair specially prepared for him. The priests, one by one,



presented themselves before him, to kiss the episcopal ring, and offer their respects.

It was a sight to watch the courteous and kindly manner with which Villarosa greeted them; with unexcelled apropos he invariably talked of the right thing to the right man, and this so distinctly that no word of his was lost. When Don Davide's turn came, the old gentleman's expressive face brightened even more cordially. Accentuating each word, he said: "I have read your speech in the *Pensiero Cattolico*, Don Davide, and must compliment you highly. The needs of the flock, whether spiritual or temporal, must be the first thought of a true pastor, for priesthood does not exclude, aye, it signifies active citizenship; I give you my warmest blessing, and am at one with you in your noble efforts."

If a thunderbolt had struck the audience the effect could not have been more startling. What! His Excellency Conte Guido Villarosa, Bishop and *grand-seigneur*, sympathised with this young scatterbrain who dared preach subversive theories and was almost as dangerous as the Socialists themselves! What was the world coming to, if even a Prince of the Church departed from the time-honoured rules which said that priest and landlord must sustain each other?



Perhaps Monsignore himself was not quite conscious of the import of his approval; impulsive, as he always was, he had spoken more probably out of genuine kindness of heart. The efforts of this young Curato to lift himself and those entrusted to his care from the deadly stagnation of their lives had awakened his ready sympathy, and again this attempt to take an active part in the nation's life responded to the Bishop's old and unfulfilled desire of blending together religion and patriotism. Don Davide was the most astonished of them all: a support from that quarter had appeared impossible, and his nature was not noble enough to banish from his mind the thought that this public approval dissimulated either a trap or a manoeuvre.

So while the priests were robing for the procession tongues wagged furiously but in whispers, and, as if on wireless, the Bishop's words reached Varese, and appeared that afternoon, enthusiastically commented on, in a double-leaded "leader" of the *Pensiero Cattolico*, over the signature of the editor, Don Sisto Prina.

In the meanwhile, at Casbenno, Guido took possession of the arbor, with some novels he had wisely brought from Milan, a box of cigarettes, and a capacious basket-chair. The young officer



was wholly intent upon doing nothing very comfortably. Young, rich, healthy, and heart-whole, he was perfectly at ease with himself and life and all things in general. Not even pretending to open a book, he lay there contentedly. Suddenly he was startled by the deep-throated bay of a hound, almost at his elbow, so near it sounded. It proceeded from "that hateful Villa Meroni" as they all called it. Through a small aperture in the thick foliage he could see below, between steep, grassy banks, the road leading up to the invisible house. As he peeped through, the dog, a huge, shaggy boarhound, came into view, bounding delightedly. As a connoisseur he admired the ferocious-looking animal, and while so engaged, a lady stepped into his limited field of vision. He smiled, guessing that it must be Don Eusebio's *hernestically* veiled widow, and became lazily curious. Probably he expected to see a frump, so he fairly gasped; she had a slight, elegant figure, a dainty oval face, pale and pure as marble, and above all, defiant, profoundly sad, hawk-like eyes, never to be forgotten when once seen.

Guido stood transfixed. The clear tones of the lady's voice floated up to him as she called once to her dog, "Quiet, Simoun!" and she was gone. "Where on earth have I seen her before?" Guido



kept asking to himself, but he racked his brain uselessly, finding no clue. For the whole day he mused about the apparition, though he repeatedly attempted to give up the search. And, strangely enough, he never mentioned it when his uncle and Don Paolino returned for dinner.

The Bishop was evidently in the best of spirits; his visit to Gavirate had been thoroughly successful. He had preached the opening sermon at the consecration of the new church, dedicated to St. Guido in his honor, and had been greatly pleased by the impression created in the great crowd congregated to hear him. Villarosa had no doubt a touch of vanity in his temperament, but it was so unobtrusive and evidenced in such an innocent fashion, almost as if apologising for the peccadillo, that it rendered his intercourse only more delightful.

Dinner being nearly ready, Monsignore went upstairs for a moment, asking Don Paolino to bring the mail to the sitting-room. At his return he became at once conscious that something had gone amiss. Looking a preternaturally serious mien, Paolino handed him the *Pensiero Cattolico*, pointing at some bold headlines and saying: "Will your Excellency read *this*," with a tremendous emphasis on the word "this." It was the highly



colored and minutely circumstantial narrative of the Bishop's reception of Don Davide Capelletti, followed by an enthusiastic eulogy upon "the magnanimous spirit of progress and true evangelical doctrine animating the noble head of our diocese."

The good Bishop smiled happily, not a little flattered by the great sensation his words had created. He was rather inclined to quarrel with Don Paolino's discontented expression, but after carefully reading the article, he saw that it invested his words with an exceptional importance, such as he originally had never dreamt of. But at the same time, his quick and brilliant mind was suddenly inspired with the comprehension of the vast possibilities invested in their fulfilment. The happy smile died upon his lips, he looked Don Paolino full in the face and replied to his unspoken remonstrances:

"Why not? Is not the betterment of the flock the first duty of a pastor? Is it, forsooth, an error to declare it publicly? Is it not true that the toilers of the soil here, under our own eyes, are shamelessly oppressed and despoiled, and what is still worse, purposely kept in ignorance of their natural rights to enlightenment and progress, so that they should continue to vegetate as mere



beasts of burden? You, Paolino, a son of the soil yourself, do you not experience a thrill of sympathy for your brethren, blindly groping their way in the dark, when they ought to be the very backbone and sinew of our country?"

At this vigorous attack Don Paolino pensively stroked his nose, then that peasant origin appealed to by the Bishop prompted the reply: "I have never worried much about the 'backbone and sinew of our country,' your Excellency, but if I know anything, it's the peasants. I warrant that if people begin to prate to them about 'rights,' they'll soon imagine that there's nothing upon earth to which they are not entitled; give them the little finger, and they'll take the whole arm and the rest of the body too, if they're able. Why, they'll become uppish and insolent and uncontrollable. Yes! It's no use shaking your head, Monsignore, the peasants are ignorant of their rights, maybe, but they're mighty sharp at getting by stealth all they can't obtain righteously. Peasants are nasty beasts, that's what they are!"

Villarosa had listened with growing impatience to these words. A large landowner himself, he had lived in the midst of peasants almost all his life, and, on account of his spiritual ministrations to them, had penetrated into their souls more



intimately than most people, so he was forced to recognise the great element of truth underlying Don Paolino's harsh words. At the same time, he considered this opinion largely due to Paolino's hostility to his own class, natural in one who had unexpectedly risen above it.

"Peasants are beasts, you say!" the Bishop hotly replied, "and if I grant you the truth of this slanderous statement, the responsibility lies at the door of us landowners, who for centuries have taught them to be beasts by our oppression, and above all, by our neglect. Now we must redress the great evil we have committed, and if we suffer by so doing, it will be the just atonement for the past sins of our fathers. The more I think over the words I uttered on the spur of the moment, the more I am inclined to believe that they were inspired from on high. Yes, a new work has been set before me by my Divine Master, and with His aid I will accomplish it!"

A wonderful light of enthusiasm and faith, earnest, pure, and selfless, shone in the Bishop's limpid eyes. As always, Don Paolino was impressed with awe at his master's saintliness, but this did not prevent him from firing a parting shot. "Your Excellency is a saint, every one knows that; but what will they say down there?"



and he repeatedly jerked his right thumb over his left shoulder. That would have been enigmatical to any one not accustomed to Don Paolino's peculiarities, but Monsignore well knew that his secretary regarded Rome with respectful yet suspicious consideration, and always alluded cryptically to it as "down there." Villarosa was going to reply, when the dinner was announced, and the dispute interrupted, thus relieving the old gentleman from the necessity of replying *ipso facto* to an objection of which he fully appreciated the weight.

Guido, in the meanwhile, had taken no part in the conversation, and was vacantly gazing out of the window. This was quite extraordinary for him, but somehow it had not attracted the attention of the two older men. During dinner the general equanimity was restored; they chatted freely, and of course about Gavirate. Monsignore and Don Paolino, however, at every moment seemed disposed to revert to Don Sisto Prina's article, and then Guido at once lapsed into absent-mindedness as if quite content to do so.

At the end of the meal a carriage was heard, then a good-humored voice bidding the servants not to announce the visit. The Bishop and Guido had just exclaimed, "That's the doctor!" when a



very tall, lank, and loose-limbed individual leisurely made his appearance; he had a tiny head on an immensely long neck, was as bald as a billiard ball, with a thick, close-cropped grey beard, which almost grew up to his eyes, two sparkling beads as piercing as gimlets.

"Are you here at last, you shameless atheist?" cried the Bishop in high glee. "That's a nice thing not to have visited us for the last eight or ten days, when you knew that our Guido was here!"

The newcomer, in short sentences which appeared to pop suddenly out of a gun levelled at his audience, responded: "Couldn't. I'm here to nurse sick people, not visit healthy individuals. Broken no bones yet, young warrior, with your horse-racing? Birds very shy, eh, you lazy-shanks?" and he shook hands all round.

Dr. Romolo Sandri had been for the last fifteen years the attending physician of Monsignor Villarosa, this being another grievance entertained by the Zelanti against him. Why did the Bishop obstinately stick to this rough, uncouth personage, a godless reprobate, a Socialist, and (oh, horror of horrors!) a Freemason? Why not give his custom to "dear Dr. Grassi," the sleek, obsequious practitioner and leading light of the clerical party



in Varese? But, murmur as they would, the Bishop continued to consult Sandri, holding him in great esteem and friendship. He replied to those who remonstrated with him upon this sore point, that he consulted his doctor about his body and not his soul, and that, after all, he only followed the example given by his Holiness the late Pope, who had entrusted his very life to a surgeon, a Mason of the "thirty-third degree,"—this *boutade*, of course, closing the incident.

Don Paolino, at the same time the bosom friend and fervid antagonist of Sandri, in everlasting discussions about the usefulness of priests, whom the doctor stoutly maintained would be better employed at the plough, soon took up the cudgels, observing: "The doctor had something better to do next door. He had no time to inquire after our Guido, though I myself saw his *carretella* day after day at the gate of that hateful Villa Meroni!"

Sandri had one of his peculiarly soft and musical laughs, then replied: "You'd make a first-class detective, Don Paolino! That's at least more useful than a bird-snaring lazy cleric, I know! Yes, Monsignore, I came and still come daily to assist an old servant in that Villa."

Guido, now breathlessly interested, cautiously queried: "A servant of the widow who has rented



the Villa?" and Monsignore commented: "You well imagine, doctor, how angry I am at the Villa being rented!" while Don Paolino chimed in, "Don Eusebio says that a widow Lironi has taken it."

"Don Eusebio—pah-h-h! I know nothing of widows Lironi! She's no widow. Her name is Marchesa di Tavernay."

These words had not left Sandri's lips when Guido exultingly cried out: "By Jove! I've got it!" and startled the others. Crimsoning to his eyes, he stammered a very lame explanation of finding suddenly an historical name which had eluded him all day.

"The Marchesa is Italian by birth, though the name is French," the doctor continued: "a Romagnola, from Imola, I think; her maiden name, Leoni—Donna Delia Leoni—a mighty pretty name too, and she's a darling!" Sandri expressively kissed his finger-tips, then went on: "Husband, very much alive. A gambler and a roué. A thorough scoundrel. She's well rid of him. The French have divorce, bless them! Not like here—stick and rot—as we Italians do!" Then turning abruptly upon Villarosa: "No need of looking glum and shocked, my friend. Divorce is the only one moral and logical corrective of marriage!"



The Bishop, of course, was disgusted. An orthodox Roman Catholic, he held marriage indissoluble, and could find no reason warranting its termination by the will of man. All considerations to the contrary were more than useless, so the tenant of the Villa Meroni became doubly distasteful to him, as he considered it an insult that such a person should become his neighbor. In spite of Sandri's earnest testimony about the charm, intelligence, and kindness of the Marchesa, Monsignore remained obdurate in his prejudiced hostility, while Guido, still more distraught than before, made but feeble efforts to join in the conversation.

The doctor stayed until late, as the Bishop was loath to part from him, and detained him whenever he rose to leave. Finally Monsignore escorted his departing visitor to his *carretella*, so that he might continue to the last minute their discussion about the rival claims of Church and State in the organisation of the family.

Guido went up to his rooms, but not to bed. For a long while he looked out of his window, smoking moodily, a marked contrast with his lazy contentment in the morning. That name of Tavernay had awakened in his mind a host of memories: his short stay, two years before, at the Tor di Quinto High School of Equitation, near



Rome, the hunting and racing, and the famous Hunt Ball at which he had been introduced to the same Marchesa, the Italian wife of a French diplomat who had been pointed out to him as a desperate gambler and a "devil of a fellow." He perfectly recollected how radiant and lovely she had looked, merely a bride of a few months, overflowing with life and fun. How thoroughly they had enjoyed themselves during the long cotillion they had danced together! And now? The happy, thoughtless child, for she could not have been much more than eighteen, was transformed in that strikingly pale, almost tragic-looking woman, undoubtedly still beautiful, but of a beauty made of sorrow and bitterness and pride! Heigh-ho! for those merry, innocent eyes which had rested so contentedly and trustfully upon the gay throng! And now their wild, haughty, rebellious look haunted him mysteriously and unremittingly. Guido had never before suffered from fits of introspection, but somehow or other the vivid contrast between the past and present awoke in him a deeper nature, unsuspected till then by all, even by himself. He looked in the night very much with that expression peculiar to his uncle, when he contemplated the lake and hills spread out before his window.



Suddenly Guido shook himself together, lamely attempting to laugh aloud in derision of all this nonsense. He muttered: "Well, I'm the greatest idiot alive!" but his last glance in the direction of Villa Meroni amply belied his words. Finally he undressed and went to bed, and as youth asserted itself by a delicious torpor heralding a sound night's rest the distant bay of a hound broke the peaceful silence. Half unconscious already, he smiled and murmured, "Watch well . . . Simoun . . . good dog!"

Early next morning Guido took out his mare for a ride. The air was fresh and clear as he wended his way up the hill. At a certain point he turned from the high-road into a rough bridle-path through the thick woods of chestnut and oak. The track he had chosen, with its loose rocks and deep ruts, was by no means adapted for riding, especially a nervous thoroughbred, who pranced and skipped about in the most erratic fashion. Guido, however, was a thorough horseman, and kept the mare reasonably quiet simply by talking to her in soothing tones. After a curvet more violent than the others, he felt that the mare was suddenly very lame, so, thinking that a stone had become lodged in her hoof, he dismounted to find that she had cast a shoe, and that even a walk



was painful to her. Quite angry, and disposed to administer a thorough scolding to his grooms, he of course took the reins in hand and walked down the path, followed by the pretty animal, who from time to time confidentially rubbed her soft nose against her master's cheek.

The path had become still narrower, so that between the high banks on each side there was barely room to pass. It was a lovely spot, shaded by huge chestnut-trees, through the thick foliage of which the morning sun here and there shot bright patches of light upon the ferns and bracken. The long descent ended in this hollow, then the path rose again precipitously, turning abruptly at a very acute angle so that the miniature glen appeared without issue. Guido halted a moment, partly to give his limping mare a rest and partly to enjoy the exquisite peace and beauty of the spot, when without warning there was a quick rustle in the underbrush, and a ferocious-looking hound bounded on the path in front of him, and, growling ominously, crouched as if to spring at his throat. The nervous mare pricked up her ears as if ready to bolt, but, instantly checked by her master, stopped dead, quivering all over and refusing to budge. So between the fierce dog in front and the frightened horse behind, the young



officer found himself in a very distressing and ridiculous predicament.

With a start Guido instantly recognised the dog, and saw the obvious necessity of placating him at once, so he familiarly addressed him by name, calling out, "Simoun . . . good dog!" Thus addressed by a totally unknown human being, the hound hardly knew what to do, so he sat on his haunches, still suspicious and watchful, but no longer actively aggressive. Guido then turned his attention upon the mare, but saw that it would be impossible for him to pass, as, even if the dog did not object, which was very doubtful, she could not be coaxed into moving a step.

The young man's temper was rising fast, for he knew that Simoun's mistress could not be very far off. He objected most seriously at being discovered in that ludicrous attitude by a pretty woman, so, lifting his riding-crop, he belligerently took a step forward, only to see the dog display a formidable set of teeth, and then to be violently jerked back by the mare's angry tug. Just as he endeavored not to lose his balance the Marchesa appeared in front of him. A ghost of a smile played upon her strong mouth, and she severely called her dog to heel; in clear and polite but cold and formal tones, she begged to be excused for



the inconvenience her dog had caused. Guido, cap in hand, explained what had occurred and disclaimed all annoyance. Then, overcoming an unaccountable fit of shyness, he added: "Pardon, Marchesa, but dare I recall my name to you—Lieutenant Calvello—and the fact that two years ago I had the honour of dancing the cotillion with you at the Hunt Ball in Rome?"

A painful flush overcast the marble pallor of her cheeks, her eyes had one flash of reminiscent anger, but feeling that she was bound to reply something to this courteous and perfectly correct remark, she said: "You must have a most wonderful memory for faces to have instantly recognised me! I know that I have altered very much . . . since then."

How was it that Guido's ready wit did not prompt him an obvious compliment, even if it had to be substantiated by a white lie? He blushed, but unhesitatingly confessed how he had seen her, how she had vividly but indistinctly recalled the past, and finally how Dr. Sandri had casually mentioned her name. There Guido imperceptibly faltered, suddenly remembering her divorce. She, on her side, detected this hesitation with the remarkable promptitude peculiar to highly strung temperaments, but, strange to say,



this discovery rather served to thaw her icy reserve, for she had the intuition that it had been prompted by genuine sympathy and not by the curiosity of a worldling, at the same time anxious and afraid to broach a slippery subject.

"Marchesa di Tavernay no longer!" she deliberately said, looking him full in the eyes. "I am now once more Delia Leoni, so you must never call me by that other name . . . I hate!"

There was such a fierce intensity of feeling in her voice that Guido was startled, vaguely perceiving that behind it all there was the tragic agony of a heart, so poignant and intense that his thoughtless, easy-going nature could not realise its possibility. The situation was getting extremely uncomfortable for Guido, who murmured a vague and incomprehensible apology, so that Delia, wishing to ease matters, patted the mare's glossy neck, pleasantly remarking:

"I returned upon my steps as I missed my dog, and thus came to the rescue. Walk her along now, and as we are going the same way I will see that Simoun behaves." The dog keeping well in front, the capricious mare was at once pacified, following them as a lamb, while Delia and Guido continued together their walk.

Neither of the two spoke much: a natural re-



serve guarded Delia's each word, though somehow she was attracted by the open, guileless, even naïve countenance of this young officer. As to Guido, he had lost all his sprightly assurance. He was absorbed in a mute and unreasoning admiration of something, he knew not what, which was not wholly due to the grace and beauty of his companion. It seemed to spring from an intimate consciousness of new and unrevealed ideals far above his own elementary conception of life. The few words they exchanged were the merest commonplace: the weather, the beauty of the district, and finally the fact that they were neighbors.

"Then you are the nephew of the Bishop of Varese?" Delia inquired after he had repeatedly mentioned his uncle, and an expression of distrust flitted over her lovely face.

But Guido did not see, or rather could not understand it. He told her all he owed to Monsignore, how he had cared for him since his babyhood, taking the place of the mother he had never known, and all this with such loving enthusiasm that the young man's honest face glowed again, and Delia could not help being touched and amused by his boyish eloquence.

At the gate of the Villa Meroni Guido bowed



with courtly grace over Delia's little hand and watched her disappear in her winding avenue. Then, unconsciously suppressing a sigh, he went on to the stables of the villa, thus avoiding the main entrance, for, he said to himself, the mare needed immediate attention. To tell the truth, he was instinctively reluctant to meet his uncle or Don Paolino, as what they had said on the preceding evening now disturbed him greatly. So, after handing his mare to the grooms, whom he did not find the heart to scold, he slipped up unobserved to his rooms to think and ponder and "perchance to dream" over his unexpected adventure.

But there was no reason for Guido to worry. It was the Bishop's reception day, and he was very busy with matters of the diocese. It was no mere ceremony, for Villarosa treated personally all affairs brought to his notice. The fact that he expected the culprits of a recent scandal that same morning rendered him very irritable and nervous. These two priests who had quarrelled, defaming each other about a favorite cook, were middle-aged, swarthy-looking individuals, coarse and not over-clean, their clerical garb only accentuating their uncouthness, which would have escaped notice if they had worn their native



fustian. Arriving almost simultaneously in the little ante-room of the Bishop's private quarters, they glared ferociously at each other, much to the amused curiosity of the few other priests still awaiting their turn of audience.

Don Paolino, passing backwards and forwards, at the sight of them made an angry gesture of disgust. He knew that the inevitable scene was bound to agitate and disturb his beloved master, so he looked at them with undisguised aversion and growled a comprehensive "You are here, are you?" which made them quake in their shoes.

After a while the Bishop appeared, ushering out Arciprete Sidoli, the Dean of Varese, a tall, gaunt, saturnine man, with roving, unsteady eyes, and considered as the chief of the Zelanti in the diocese. Villarosa invariably treated him with the greatest consideration, well knowing that the man was his worst enemy, and too proud to show that he was aware of the fact. The only important business now on hand being that of the rival Curati, the remaining affairs were rapidly dispatched, and Monsignore directed Don Paolino to introduce the rivals.

They found the Bishop sitting bolt upright in his big arm-chair, looking so majestic, so austere, so stern, that Don Paolino himself, though thor-



oughly accustomed to his master's quickly varying moods, was struck by the present contrast with his habitually sweet and benign demeanor, wondering if it was exclusively due to the transgressions of the rival priests rather than to a novel direction taken by the Bishop's impressionable mind. The priests, looking most uncomfortable, had slunk in behind the secretary, for they knew that a tremendous storm had been brewing and that it was now about to burst over their heads.

"I am fully posted about that which brings you both before me," Villarosa began in a cold and forbidding tone. Then, addressing him who had complained by letter: "Do you, Don Baldassarre Minoli, maintain in the presence of Don Pietro Croci that he has malignantly and purposely disseminated calumnies concerning your morality?" The priest stuttered a confirmation of his charge, then, goaded by his hated enemy's presence, began a tumultuous rehearsal of the story. With irresistible authority the Bishop checked him by a gesture which froze the words on his very lips. Then turning to the other priest: "Is this true, Don Pietro Croci?" the formidable inquisitor demanded. Staggered by the implacable directness of the question, the calumniator painfully gasped forth a half-hearted negative, and would



likewise have launched into a long story had he not been silenced even more severely by his superior.

A look of unutterable scorn came over Villarosa's handsome face. Slowly he rose to his feet, and his magnificently trained voice rose and fell as he spoke: "You call yourselves shepherds! You are entrusted with the care of souls so that they may live in the love and respect of their Maker! And then you dare sully the noble uniform of Christ's soldiers by all that is low and mean and contemptible and false? You both have committed most heinous crimes: falsehood, delation, base hatred and calumny, and, what is graver still, underlying it all, the filth and impurity of your animal lives stare me in the face! And you do not even appear to understand it: your hearts are hardened and your souls withered by the habit of vice and shame! Whitened sepulchres filled with carrion, you dare preach unto others that which you do not practise. You dare approach the altar and lift up unto the Father the awful holocaust of His Son's flesh and blood with lies upon your lips, with hate and lust in your hearts, with hands reeking of the corruption of your daily lives! Each of your sacerdotal ministrations is an insult to man, a blasphemous



desecration of God, and the greatest criminals could approach the Lord's Divine Supper more innocently and more deservedly than you, wicked shepherds, wolves in the sheepfold, traitorous servants, forsworn recreants, and perjurers!"

The priests, terrified, quailed under this impassioned denunciation, and Don Paolino later declared that even he was trembling all over, and would have much preferred to have been ten feet underground. For a minute the Bishop was silent, overcome by the profound intensity of his feelings, as there was not a word he had uttered which did not respond to a lifelong conviction. Then, in clarion tones, his voice becoming even more sonorous and penetrating, he continued:

"My duty is clear. I ought to expel you both from the Church, or at least suspend you *a divinis*, but what then?" He was again silent for a minute, and the two wretches fell on their knees and grovelled in the dust. Monsignore went on: "You must abandon your parishes at once, and enter the Retreat at Rhò for as long as I may think fit!" This was too much for the two men, and they set up a most undignified howl of fear and rage, which thoroughly roused the indignation of the earnest prelate. "Away, away with you!" he thundered, pointing to the door. "Away!



As the angel with the flaming sword whom the Lord placed before the gate of Eden, so your sins are arrayed to banish you from the Lord's presence! You have no ray of contrition in your hearts, no desire to mend, and are debasing yourselves as the cowards you are, not in horror of your sins but that you may continue to wallow in your mire! Away, away, I say! I will allow you a fortnight to consider my words, then you will confess your sins to me, and I will judge whether the grace of God has touched your hardened hearts; till then, dare not celebrate. Keep rigorously to your rooms, in solitude, fasting, and prayer, so that the Light may shine upon you. For all, you will be indisposed. I will send oblates to take charge of your parishes for the time being. Now . . . go!"

Like a couple of whipped curs they heavily rose to their feet and, managing to find the door, went out, followed by Don Paolino. Never had the Bishop been so impressive and so severe. The ashen pallor of his cheeks and the flashing light in his eyes had made his good secretary most fearful of the possible consequences. So, as soon as he had unceremoniously bundled out the culprits, he flew back to give at all costs a piece of his mind to his master. But as he opened the door the words



died upon his lips. Villarosa was kneeling on his *prie-Dieu*, his hands convulsively clasped together in a passionate supplication, while large tears were slowly running down his delicate cheeks.

Don Paolino reverently bowed his head as in the presence of something holy. He softly closed the door and ran away.



## CHAPTER III

### A PRIEST AND A PUBLIC DUTY

It was the invariable habit of Monsignor Villarosa to rise at a very early hour both in winter and summer. As soon as his Mass was over he went to his study, and after a frugal breakfast, consisting of a glass of fresh milk, never left it again until midday, when lunch was served. During these hours even Don Paolino dared not disturb him, unsummoned, and the servants were rigorously instructed never to go near the Bishop's private apartment. The study was a spacious room, looking over the magnificent panorama of the lake and hills. Villarosa practically resided at Casbenno all the year round; the Vescovado, his official residence in Varese, was a dilapidated and unsuitable building, and this villa being most comfortable and in close proximity to the town, there was no reason that he should leave it.

The furniture of the Bishop's study consisted mainly in enormous and heavily laden book-



shelves, occupying every available space and encroaching even upon the contiguous hall and the bedroom, effectively a large alcove of this study. This library was Villarosa's pride and passion; it consisted, with very few exceptions, of historical, theological, and philosophical works, almost all in their original language, as the Bishop was a distinguished linguist, and could equally appreciate French, German, English, and Spanish, not counting Latin, Greek, and Hebraic.

The most striking peculiarity of the library was its universality of tendencies. Of course, Villarosa, being a Bishop, was permitted to read freely even those books most severely prohibited by the Congregation of the Index, and this liberty he used to its fullest extent. On his shelves Renan and Strauss elbowed St. Augustine and Origen, while Haeckel and Thomas à Kempis stood side by side. The Bishop had spared neither time nor money to render his collection of exegetical works on the Old and New Testaments almost unique, and the principal publishers the world over had his standing orders to send him everything appearing on this subject. It was accordingly rumored that for the last twenty years the Bishop had been engaged in the composition of a mighty work, but somehow nothing of it had yet



transpired, so that the learned world was still ignorant of his name, while the higher clergy smiled ironically when any one referred to "the labors of Bishop Villarosa," as much as to infer that it was all a fizzle and that nothing would ever come out of it.

Don Paolino was therefore greatly startled out of his morning's lazy quietude by a long and insistent call of the electric bell which connected his quarters with the Bishop's apartment. "What's up?" the good secretary grumbled. "It's not yet nine, and he never calls in the morning! I hope that he's not unwell!" Thus anxiously communing with himself, Paolino hurried upstairs and arrived out of breath in his master's presence.

Villarosa stood by his huge desk, upon which were piled in perfect order three majestic heaps of manuscript in his small and beautifully clear hand. The old gentleman was radiantly happy: for many years Paolino had not known him to look so robust and youthful, with that great intimate joy flashing in his eyes. The secretary stopped short at the unusual sight, and Villarosa, with an exultant ring in his voice, cried out: "Hurry up! Hurry up, Paolino, my son! Come here and look! 'Exegi monumentum!' It's finished! Finished!"



Still, Don Paolino remained obtusely open-mouthed. Confusedly he understood that something important had taken place, never guessing what it was. With the rest of the world he thought the Bishop's "great work" a myth, and all that written paper nonplussed him. This attitude rather irritated his master, brimming over with delight, and made him cry out:

"Why, man, don't you see that I've finished my work on *The Symbolism of the Fourth Gospel*? Don't you see that twenty-five years of labor have brought forth their fruit? Can't you see that those pages are destined to bring Guido Villarosa's name down to posterity? Can't you see that I am so happy—so happy that my heart is ready to burst? Can't you congratulate me and wish me joy?"

Don Paolini found his tongue at last, but he stared still more suspiciously upon that mountain of foolscap, covered with writing. He could not in the least appreciate the smallest fraction of the effort it had cost, and much less its scientific and ethical importance. However, all that gave happiness to his beloved master was a joy to him, quite apart from the extent and nature of this happiness itself. Don Paolino was the personification of blind and unreasoning devotion. It



almost amounted to genius, as demonstrated whenever a discussion had occurred with anybody daring to question the absolute, transcendent, unique perfections of Bishop Villarosa. At the same time, this great devotion entitled him to freely express his opinion at all times and upon all subjects, though with inborn delicacy he used this privilege only when his master and himself were alone.

But now Don Paolino's expressions were most guarded and constrained. "Your Excellency is happy. So am I, of course, very happy! Though ——" With a nervous little cough he stopped short.

"Though what?" the Bishop testily demanded.

Don Paolino artfully ignored the question, but tentatively proceeded: "All that is about the Gospel of St. John? Your Excellency is a great saint and a great scholar; but what on earth could you find to say about this particular Gospel? I have read most of it, at Mass, of course, over and over, and as to its opening verses I know them by heart as I repeat them every day after the 'Ite, Missa est'; but it's all so simple and clear that even if I was tortured I couldn't write one thousandth part of that!" And he emphatically pointed to the manuscript.



All the joy and elation disappeared as by magic from Villarosa's countenance. He sat down with a disappointed, weary little gesture, beckoning to Don Paolino to do the same, and replied: "It is quite impossible for me to explain all I said in these three big volumes, but they are soon to be published, and then, Paolino, you can read them at your ease."

The Bishop would have said more, but at the word "published" his secretary had a visible start of surprise, not altogether free from displeasure and fear.

"Published?" he asked in an undertone, and, receiving a decided affirmative, he continued in a low voice: "Your Excellency means to say that he is going to have all of that printed? Is your Excellency sure that it is altogether wise to do so? We priests had better be very careful, and the less noise we make the soonest mended. *Down there* they have very scant sympathy for priests who write. And I had not long ago quite a sharp tussle with that black-faced hypocrite Don Felice, when he reported to me that the Arciprete said it was surely wise that your Excellency 'only appeared to work, but never published anything, for it would certainly be censured, if nothing worse'! I then told Don Felice, of course, to



mind his own business and to advise his informers to do the same, as anything you wrote must be true and good and great; but then . . . I never dreamt that . . . you had anything to publish, and now . . . there are to be three enormous volumes!"

Villarosa listened in perfect silence. A heavy frown obscured his brow, and when Don Paolino finished, for a while Monsignore remained absorbed in thought. Then a profound sigh escaped him, and with a simple dignity which lent a peculiar spiritual grandeur to his words, he said:

" 'For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation with the world.' "

He was again silent, then, in his usual tone, he continued:

"Do you remember those words of Paul to the Corinthians? I see by your face, Paolino, that you do not, for, as you say, you read the Gospels only at Mass. You prefer not to worry about understanding and interpreting them. You are, perhaps, the wiser of the two! So the Arciprete said I would surely be censured? And perhaps



worse? He . . . knows so much about me. Look here, Paolino, this manuscript represents my lifework; it is the result of endless thought, and perhaps in a worldly-wise fashion you are right about the opportunity of publishing it. But my conscience cannot be silenced, and it commands me to proclaim the truth. After all, nothing much can be said of the first volume, mere historical research concerning the probable authorship of——”

“Authorship?” hastily interrupted Don Paolino, greatly alarmed and upset—“authorship? Why . . . the Gospel of St. John was written . . . by St. John . . . of course! You cannot possibly discuss that?”

“Paolino, my son, you are really a good man, the pearl of friends, and the most honest soul I know, but as regards biblical exegesis you are deplorably ignorant, not by your fault, I admit, but ignorant all the same. At the actual stage of exegetical science——”

“Ignorant . . . ignorant!” again interrupted the secretary, not a little riled; “at all events it is safer to be ignorant as I am than talk of science and religion in the same breath as your Excellency; better be ignorant than discuss the authorship of Gospels like your Excellency! Science, for-



sooth! As if it was not considered a sin *down there* to know too much!"

Suddenly an unexpected change came over Don Paolino. It was as if the premonition of the future had inspired him. A ray of love and devotion lit up his sallow features, and, leaning earnestly forward, in an impassioned whisper he spoke:

"O master, my beloved master, do you not know that you are all in all to me, that I'd gladly give my life to save you one minute's sorrow? If this gives me any claim upon you, ponder over and over again before rushing into print! Why should you, so happy and peaceful, fly in the face of Providence and risk it all for a heap of blackened paper? All you have written, master, is truth and wisdom, no doubt, but the rest of the clergy, the mighty congregations, the powerful cardinals, his Holiness himself, may not see it in the same light! And then? To see you persecuted, slandered, tortured by your enemies—you, so good, so noble, so high above us all! O master, master! follow the advice of this poor ignorant peasant, who thinks of you alone!" And with these broken words he tenderly placed his great brown hand upon the Bishop's delicate fingers.

The devotion brimming over in each of Paolino's words deeply touched Villarosa's heart. Yet the



cheerful but adamant energy of his temperament would not allow him for a moment to reconsider his decision. He was convinced that his conscience demanded the fulfilment of a high moral duty, and this conviction had grown stronger as the years passed by. It hurt him to the quick to disregard his old friend's advice, but to shirk his duty would be plainly the act of a coward, and that he could never be. Then he no doubt considered that Don Paolino's terror was grossly exaggerated, and due to his hereditary hostility to "print," and to his suspicious fear of Rome, fostered and aggravated by the insinuations of the Arciprete and his Zelanti. The Bishop naïvely believed that they were not fit persons to interpret the opinions of the great Roman congregations, and still less those of his Holiness. So Monsignore kindly smiled upon Don Paolino, and, affectionately patting the big brown fist, soothingly replied:

"Paolino, my son, you absolutely must not be too anxious about the consequences of my actions; you are apt to worry overmuch about my welfare, and to think that the whole world is holding its breath in the expectation of what I'm going to do next. As to all that tittle-tattle, it's not worth listening to. I humbly believe that I have done



my work 'in simplicity and godly sincerity,' and that it must be given to the world in obedience to my Master, who said, 'Let your light so shine before men.' It is lack of proper respect to fear that his Holiness will not recognise at once the spirit in which I have written. So cheer up, my dearest old friend; let us be happy to-day and take no heed for the morrow! God will provide! Now make me up a fine parcel of this first volume and address it to Lapi, with whom I have arranged all particulars for its publication."

With this the conversation ended. It, however, left indelible traces in the hearts of both. The Bishop's enthusiasm, though not in the least abated by Paolino's vague fears and prognostics, assumed gradually a nuance of belligerent aggressiveness. At the bottom of his heart Villarosa had to admit that there was some great good sense in what Paolino had said. He knew that the adventure of his early youth was not forgotten, and that his constant refusal to enter the political service of the Vatican had rendered its authorities far from well disposed towards him. That "old Villarosa temper" made him scent powder, and he seemed as if inclined to follow the tactical aphorism that attack is the best defence.

As to Don Paolino, he henceforth lived in a



state of feverish and ill-concealed agitation, which manifested itself by violent rebuffs to those who hinted even innocently at the Bishop's literary activity. He intensified his cares for his master, watching, scrutinising, and studying everybody and everything concerning him with that jealous alertness, that shrewd perspicacity, which formed the main characteristics of his temperament. And that same morning, while going personally to mail what in his heart he called "his Excellency's folly," he fell foul of poor, harmless Don Eusebio, the Curato of Casbenno. As the latter joked him very innocently about the load he was carrying, Paolino turned upon him so ferociously, and assailed him in such unmeasured and unsacerdotal terms, that the fellow, startled out of the little wits he possessed, sought for safety in instant flight.

With the completion of his great work it seemed as if Villarosa's activity had redoubled. Then began the really notable period of his episcopal career. The public approbation which he had given to Don Davide Capelletti and his friends had wonderfully assisted their efforts and added to their numbers. Don Sisto Prina's paper, the *Corriere Cattolico*, had become the official paper of the party, as the wary journalist saw what this



meant for him, and accordingly brought to them the precious support of his facile pen. Prina became, in fact, Don Davide's best adviser, and it was at his suggestion that the young leader frequented more and more the episcopal villa.

For a considerable time Don Davide, who previously had called upon his Bishop only when indispensable, felt most uncomfortable in his presence. He could not get used to Monsignore's aristocratic ease, though the old gentleman was kindness itself. The secret of this feeling lay in the very different stuff out of which these two men were made: Don Davide, because of his lively intelligence, appreciated the fact and resented it as an index of his own moral and mental inferiority. So the young Curato was quite disposed to use his Bishop for all he was worth, but in his heart he disliked the noble old gentleman, and was quite prepared, at the first occasion, to sacrifice and even betray him. But by their visits Capelletti and Prina aimed to compromise the Bishop as much as possible, for, judging him as they did by their own inferior standards, they could not appreciate the nobility of his motives. The conviction that a new duty had been pointed out to him by a special act of Providence was imperishably graven in Villarosa's soul, and there-



fore he threw himself unhesitatingly into the fray.

Not one single thought of personal ambition inspired him; on the contrary, it was for him a pure and unselfish apostolate, a mission of self-oblivion, the redress of an age-long injustice; he was willing, nay, he was anxious, to submit to all it might entail, as it embodied those principles of brotherly love which Jesus had preached and for which He had died. And besides these truly evangelical purposes the enterprise was flavored by a dash of heroism which appealed to his combative temperament, suppressed for so long. Of the bitterness in store for him, of the inevitable ingratitude, of the baseness and treachery of those who now burnt incense at his shrine he neither thought nor cared. Neither did he listen to Don Paolino's prudent advice not to mix in the struggle; this might have been dictated by good, solid common-sense, but to follow it would be wholly unworthy of a Villarosa. As to his secretary's misgivings about what the authorities at Rome would think of the national tendency with which he wished to invest the new party, he was incurably optimistic, staunchly refusing to question either the social aims or the patriotic sentiments of his Holiness. And thus, with juvenile



energy and enthusiasm, Monsignore launched himself into the great campaign.

The Bishop's co-operation soon assumed an active form. By his advice "The Christian Association for Social Studies" was founded to centralise and discipline the movement, and he consented to be its honorary president by a magnificent letter published in the *Corriere Cattolico*. The success of the association was immediate and far-reaching; sections of the same sprang up in every parish of the diocese, because the clergy, to curry favor with their chief, pushed on the inscription of members by all the spiritual means at their disposal, helped also by the fact that the yearly tax was only one lira. The association soon counted many thousand subscribers among the peasants, and later a series of conferences spread its principles far out through the whole north of Italy.

Thus the agitation among the peasants grew each day, but on account of their remarkable powers of dissimulation and the clever marshalling of their chiefs the landlords had yet but a very indistinct comprehension of what was really going on, and never suspected the impending tempest. Suddenly Bishop Villarosa's Pastoral Letter burst forth upon all as a thunderbolt.



This truly magnificent piece of eloquence was, unfortunately, much too far above the heads of those to whom it was addressed. The Christian Democrats, of course, were elated and triumphant at the authoritative endorsements of their principles, but they failed to understand that the Bishop had laid the greatest stress, not so much upon the rights of the masses but upon the duties of the classes; these must strive to elevate to a high plane of moral and material welfare those submitted to them. The evangelical spirit of human brotherhood and solidarity, of which this Pastoral was the embodiment, totally escaped them, as it escaped almost all who read it. The Zelanti, probably by some mysterious *mot d'ordre*, were remarkably silent about it, although affecting in private to be grieved and shocked. As to the amorphous mass of the ignorant clergy, it was intensely worried, disturbed, and upset.

One sentence of the Pastoral was especially discussed. Speaking to the pastors of their duties, Monsignore said: "The loving and progressive enlightenment of the flocks confided to your care must ever be the goal of your spiritual ministrations. This enlightenment must necessarily include all those teachings which inspire the virtues of great and good citizenship, so that our beloved



Italy may prosper and flourish through the suppression of all injustice and the acquisition of a fair treatment for those who are poor and oppressed." This sentiment, so unusual in an Italian prelate, recalled the attention of the Lombard secular press, and one of the most authoritative of its dailies published a *résumé* of the Pastoral under the interrogative heading of "A LIBERAL BISHOP?"

Don Paolino was violently upset, as Monsignore, to escape a useless discussion, had not previously communicated to him the text of the Pastoral. When the good fellow read it *in extenso* in the *Corriere Cattolico* he fretted and fumed, but, of course, in vain. He attempted to induce Guido to remonstrate with his uncle, but this the young officer refused to do, first, because he did not feel competent to pass judgment, and secondly, because he himself thought that Monsignore was absolutely in the right. This reply riled Don Paolino unspeakably, and he growled under his breath: "All alike, these Villarosa dreamers! All alike!" Upon the whole, one single person unreservedly and understandingly admired the Pastoral—the reprobate Dr. Sandri.

A short time after the publication of the Pastoral signs of ill-humor and disaffection became notice-



able in some of the larger estates of the diocese, belonging mostly to the Milanese aristocracy. These estates were either rented to *fittabili*, or middle-men, who leased them for long tenures, and grew rich by plundering equally peasants and owners, or controlled by *fattori*, sorts of land-agents directly managing the estates for the proprietors, who stole quite as much as the *fittabili*. These symptoms, however, had cropped up under such specially aggravating circumstances that even the worst alarmists in the landlords' camp admitted that some local abuses needed reform, but never dreamt that a general agitation was preparing.

There were some croakers, of course, and Don Felice Ranzi was the most funereal of them all. He went about, Cassandra-like, prophesying death and disaster. It must be admitted that he had sufficient personal reasons. The last of one of those semi-aristocratic families peculiar to Lombardy, he possessed an estate of moderate size, distributed all over the district, as it had come to him at different periods from childless relatives. No harder, more unfair, and exacting landlord than he could well be found. He unblushingly defrauded his tenants, and it was even whispered that their wives and daughters were



helplessly victimised by his base concupiscence. In the parish of Don Davide, Lomazzo, Ranzi owned a few acres, and was accordingly *au fait* of what was going on in the very hotbed of the agitation. Knowing how intensely and deservedly he was hated, Ranzi guessed that he would be one of the very first to be called to account, and this danger for his purse and welfare encouraged him to remonstrate personally with Villarosa, not so much as the Bishop but, as he impudently expressed it, "as a brother landlord, belonging, as himself, to the nobility."

On that occasion Villarosa drew himself up to his whole height and frigidly reminded Ranzi that they were both, above all, ministers of the Gospel, that, as such, they must give the example of just and honorable treatment to their dependents, and that he was deeply grieved to add that he, Don Felice, had often failed to do so. The Curato of La Cascinetta departed with fury in his heart, and vowing secretly that he would "yet get even with that stuck-up old idiot!"

In the meantime all was tranquil enough at Casbenno; the Bishop lived in the anxious expectation of the first proofs of his volume, while Don Paolino, more and more disturbed by the new direction in which his master's mind was so impetu-



ously running, kept an untiring watch on everything and everybody. As to Guido, no one could explain why he passed without any apparent reason from the most abject despondency to the most uproarious hilarity, so that it began to puzzle and worry even his uncle, most unobservant of men.

The truth was that Guido was head over heels in love. For the first time in his life he had been assailed by a powerful, unanalysed sentiment, which made each nerve of his body throb violently and then left him limp and exhausted. He was just twenty-six, and, for an Italian, it was very late to be in love for the first time, but just because of this the acuteness of the feeling made him pass at a flash through the whole gamut, ranging from abject despair to triumphant exultation. The good Bishop had asked him guardedly some questions about this strange temper. The boy had been perfectly truthful when he replied that he was not aware of any change; but then Villarsa, although a great savant and a saint, knew little or nothing of the other sex, and was accordingly quite unable to interpret those very simple and obvious symptoms. Don Paolino, sharper or less refined, suspected, it is true, that "there must be a girl at the bottom of it"; but then he



was all indulgence where Guido was concerned, and, furthermore, of the opinion that "young men were just created for that sort of thing." So he neither worried about it nor mentioned the fact to the Bishop, as a matter of no importance.

The one most interested person, Delia, who because of her infallible womanly instinct could see more deeply than any one else into Guido's heart, had not herself attached a great weight to the discovery. Her sad experience had inspired her with a natural distrust and contempt for men in general, and, again, she was accustomed to awake such feelings. She felt, however, rather attracted by the earnest single-mindedness of Guido, who, though three years her senior, reminded her more than anything else of a big, overgrown schoolboy. And on account of this she did not see any harm in allowing the young officer to accompany her in those early morning rambles of which both appeared to be so excessively fond. It must be confessed that at first Guido had shamefacedly watched her habits and the direction of her walks, and used to meet her casually by a series of manoeuvres, so innocently artful that Delia could not refrain from smiling, and told him that his military tactics were undoubtedly creditable, but that she preferred to



be frankly asked where she was going next day, so as to be prepared for the pleasure of his company. Her irony, though tempered by the friendliness of her tone, overcame poor Guido so thoroughly that Delia's kind heart was touched; she consoled him by adding that, after all, it was very pleasant to have a nice boy for her escort instead of Simoun alone. And, strangely, the boarhound had become another bond between them; Simoun, the most fierce and exclusive of dogs, had unaccountably become devoted to the officer, the more astonishingly so that he had ever before jealously growled and even shown his teeth to his mistress's admirers. This was another good point for Guido in Delia's eyes.

Thus insensibly they grew to be upon intimate terms. The second month of Guido's furlough was too rapidly coming to a close, when one day the climax was reached in a most unexpected fashion. They had met by appointment in that shady little glen where they had renewed their acquaintance; it was a favorite spot for them, partly because of its romantic seclusion and partly because, unconfessedly, it had grown dear to them both. With Simoun curled up at their feet they sat side by side on a convenient boulder, gaily chatting of indifferent subjects. An innocent



question of Delia's about Guido's regiment suddenly recalled to him that in a few days he must leave Casbenno and go back to his duties.

"I must be back by next Tuesday, and for goodness knows how long!" he said in a dolorous voice, while a long sigh escaped him.

Somewhat surprised, Delia remarked: "I understood that you loved your profession?"

The young man diffidently replied: "I loved it decidedly . . . very much . . . once, but——" and he sighed again and was silent. Then, without any warning, as a mountain torrent suddenly breaking from its banks, he poured out the tale of his love for her. Light had dawned for him in a flash; he knew that he loved her with all his soul, so powerfully, so absorbingly, so devotedly that the simple, elemental boy grew marvellously eloquent.

It was a transfiguration, almost a miracle, and Delia, notwithstanding her bitter and cruel experience in the past, felt that this mighty wave of pure, unselfish love was sweeping her away irresistibly towards the great glimmering ocean of the Ideal for which in her dreams she had so often longed, only to be thrown, broken and bleeding, upon the cruel rocks of life's most brutal reality. Motionless she listened to him, resting



her chin upon her little ungloved hand, and her wild, rebellious eyes grew at times wonderfully soft as he told her that he must have loved her always, even before he ever saw her, and that he had only really lived since the day that he had met her again. Then, as she persisted in her silence, he misunderstood her attitude; rising, he hurriedly added in a low, passionate voice:

“I have offended and hurt you, Delia; but it was my duty not to go on seeing you as I did under false pretences! Your silence is my answer—Good-bye! May God bless you and give you all happiness!”

He took one step to depart, when with a single word she halted him as if transfixed: “Guido!” It was all; but for the first time she had called him by his Christian name. “Sit down at once and be a sensible boy!” she went on, with a pretty attempt to play the benevolent and mature relative. “Only a word: I believe that you honestly feel all you say, but what of it, then?”

Guido resumed his seat in a state of tremendous agitation, for the question was to him utterly incomprehensible; he looked wonderingly at her, so that she was struck by the transparency of his soul.

She went on: “Have you considered, thought?”



With a radiant outburst of hope he interrupted her: "Thought? Don't I know that I want you for my wife—for my own, to cherish and protect and live for? If you only could find heart to love me a little bit."

She again looked at him; a great sadness came over her, and she said: "My poor boy! you—you love a divorced woman? You, a child as yet, unite your destiny to that of one who was quaffed to its bitterest dregs the poison of life? You, happy, careless, hopeful boy, seek the love of a woman whose experience makes her old enough to be your mother? Guido, it would be the sheerest folly on your part as well as on mine!"

Guido tenderly took her little hand and kissed it with profound respect. She offered no resistance, but he felt it quiver under his lips. Then, in a voice invested with a novel virility, with a depth of feeling which struck deep in the innermost recesses of her bruised heart, he said:

"Delia, I was a boy; I am a man from this hour. As I look in your lovely face, where I now can read so much unexplained to me before, I solemnly swear that I consider you my affianced bride, from whom nothing on earth can part me, not even your will; for if you refused and repulsed me I am still yours—yours by a bond that naught



can ever break! My whole being belongs to this, the first, the only love of my life, the love which you, Delia, have taught me! I ask for nothing and deserve nothing, but one sign of yours will ever call me by your side, to serve you, and if needs be to die for you. Love me or love me not, Delia, it is all the same for me; my love is mine and will be my pride and my joy to the end of my life!"

Delia had to close her eyes for a moment; she felt suddenly small, and as if overwhelmed by the magnitude of a feeling that she herself had never known. Her early marriage had been arranged by the silly relatives on whom the care of the orphan young girl had devolved, and she had entered into it more as a schoolgirl's frolic than anything else. Tavernay's conduct had, therefore, merely wounded to the core her virginal delicacy and her pride. But she had never loved him. Now she could fathom the depths of this great unselfish love, so frankly and unassumingly declared—a love free from the perfidious innuendoes of other men, who had hoped to see her fall, an easy prey to their sensuality. Here all was so simple and so pure that she felt almost unworthy of Guido's devotion. He stood before her, looking surprisingly handsome, a glorious light of enthusi-



asm in his eyes; he was the real man to whom love is a thing above all sacred, and overshadows those conventionalities of life held by the great majority of mankind the only ones of paramount importance.

All this passed through Delia's heart in a brief second; then, without any of that false modesty common to petty feminine souls, she replied to him as simply as he had spoken: "Guido, I believe you, and"—she hesitated a second, battling against her pride—"and I also love you!"

Their lips met in one single kiss, so holy, so pure, and yet so deep that it welded together their hearts in one indissolubly.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE GRIEVANCES OF THE PEASANTRY

WHILE Delia and Guido walked slowly homewards, as if loath to abandon the tranquil nook in which the gentle flower of their love had blossomed, as they thought, unseen by all, the young officer by no means minimised the importance of his duty to his uncle, nor the fact that he was bound by his love and gratitude to tell him all at once. It was merely a moral obligation, as he was fully over age and the possessor of a large fortune of his own, but, on account of this, doubly binding.

Delia again became very grave, warning Guido that she felt sure that Monsignor Villarosa was bound to offer an invincible opposition to their plans exclusively upon the ground that she was a divorced woman. She was fully aware that the Roman Church never deviates from its principles. How could it, in self-defence, allow that the institution of marriage should be snatched from its



exclusive grasp, or that it should become, what it was ever really meant to be, a purely civil contract? This would entail too great a diminution of power. By instinct, by her education in a family which for many generations had suffered from the oppression of a corrupt priestcraft, and by the experience she had gathered in her intercourse with the ultra-Catholic Tavernays, who counted several high ecclesiastics among them, she nourished a deep aversion to the Roman Catholic clergy. Of Monsignor Villarosa personally, saving the admiration expressed by Dr. Sandri, whom she liked and esteemed, she knew almost nothing, but she was well aware of Guido's devotion to his uncle, and accordingly refrained from saying more than was needed on this delicate subject. Then she feared that her lover, on her account, would become estranged from his relative, this being, she gave him to understand, the one bitter drop in her full cup of happiness.

Guido, however, seemed little disposed to attribute as much importance as she did to the difficulties looming up on their horizon. He was naturally of a very sanguine and optimistic disposition, and furthermore the knowledge that every one of his wishes had been fulfilled by his devoted uncle prevented him from admitting that,



in such an important topic as the happiness of his whole life, merely philosophical and dogmatical considerations would debar his "Ziggio" from approving the aspirations of his heart. This conviction, strenuously asserted, prevented Delia from throwing more cold water upon his ardor, and, moreover, it was so infectious that, in spite of her maturer judgment, she soon rose herself to his diapason.

By the time they reached the villa Guido had decided to unburden himself of his secret as soon as he returned home. Thoroughly hating deceit, the young man had always felt most uncomfortable because of his cautious silence concerning his early morning walks, but then he had almost been forced into it by the violent terms with which the Bishop had denounced the wickedness of divorce, not to mention his prejudice against any one renting "that hateful Villa Meroni." This had shaped Guido's regrettable policy of silence; now, however, all these minor considerations paled into insignificance, and duty and honor compelled him to announce openly and at all costs his engagement. His kind uncle, who had done so much for him, was, by rights, entitled to hear of it at once, even if he did not approve of it.

After a protracted and tender leave-taking the



young officer rushed up to the Bishop's office very much with the same *élan* with which he would have charged the enemy, but only to find the room empty and deserted. This was a first discomfiture, and while he stood staring around blankly in a vain attempt to solve the riddle, the old butler, who had uselessly endeavored to intercept him, arrived panting upon the scene and handed him a note. It was very brief, evidently written under the stress of a powerful agitation, and ran thus:

“MY BOY,—I have very important affairs to settle in Corgeno and am leaving at once. If I do not return in time for dinner, come over to me. As you must leave for Milan on Tuesday, you can do so just as well from Corgeno.— Lovingly, ZIGGIO.”

This note filled Guido with great astonishment and even anxiety. He questioned the butler, who knew nothing except that a couple of hours before Don Paolino, looking as black as thunder, had run to the stables, and that in less than twenty minutes his Excellency and the secretary had left in the landau, ordering the coachman to drive fast. This made Guido even more anxious, and accordingly he interviewed the housekeeper, who



could only tell him that in the morning a messenger had arrived from Corgeno and obstinately insisted upon seeing Monsignore in spite of the unusual hour. These facts, together with the important communication he wished to place before his uncle, would not allow Guido to wait for an hypothetical return. In a short time he was galloping on the road to Corgeno, after writing a long letter of farewell to Delia.

The Bishop's sudden departure had even more serious causes than Guido imagined. The long-smouldering agitation among the peasants had unexpectedly burst forth, and those on the Villarosa estate were no exception. For nearly a century the property of Corgeno had been entrusted to the stewardship of the Graglia family, the *fattori* in charge. Old Giacomino Gragli, that same agent whose letter announcing the tragic death of the late Contessa had irremediably thrown the young hero of "The Thousand" back into the arms of the Church, had died at a very advanced age, long after his young master returned home, and his son, Mario, had, almost as a matter of course, stepped into his shoes. Giacomino Graglia, belonging as he did to the "good old school," had sedulously robbed his master of course, but in an affectionate and almost patriar-



chal manner, which deprived the frauds of much of their sting, both as regards the master and the peasants. Mario, instead, who had been pretentiously sent to the High School of Agriculture, lacked a moral training, and was disposed to plunder much more scientifically and less good-naturedly. His father had treated the peasants almost as equals, with boisterous, jollity, believing that it was the best system to keep their eyes shut, and, on account of his keen *savoir-faire*, they had liked him well, and never given a moment's trouble. Mario, on the contrary, thought himself a "gentleman" on the strength of what he termed his "superior education," and therefore looked down upon his "inferiors," as if they had been merely created to enrich those above them. And finally he had married the daughter of a rich *fittabile*, a dark, handsome, imperious woman whose bringing up in the same supercilious disdain of the peasantry encouraged him more and more in that order of ideas.

While Villarosa had resided at Corgeno as Curato it had been almost impossible for the Graglias either to plunder too freely or oppress the tenants, but when the master accepted the see of Varese, his enforced residence there and his many absorbing duties had prevented him from



looking closely into the management of the estate. Mario had then things all his own way. But though far from being one of the worst or even of the bad *fattori*, the agitation brought about by the Christian Democrats was bound to create a serious break between the peasants and himself.

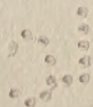
The vast conflagration which was destined to upset the whole of the Varese district did not, however, develop at Corgeno. It began in a neighboring estate of great size belonging to the young heir of a wealthy family of paper-mill owners, who, on account of his ignorance and desire to ape in all things the members of that "smart set" into which he had just managed to wriggle, left all his lands and mills in the hands of worthless or rascally subordinates. When the second crop of hay of the year was almost ripe, the peasants, under the direction of the local branch of their association, presented a memorial to their master, asking for better pay and shorter hours, one lira a day for thirteen hours' work being inadequate and unjust. Although the memorial was most respectful in its form and moderate in its demands, it received no reply whatever, probably because the proprietor did not even know of it. This cavalier and unwise treatment roused the peasants to immediate action: they refused point-



blank to reap the meadows, entailing thus a very heavy loss to the owner.

Instantly the whole countryside was up in arms: corresponding strikes broke forth as a token of solidarity with the tenants of Varano, Mercallo, and Cuvirone. Everywhere the peasants stood out for shorter hours and better wages, and at Corgeno no less than in the rest of the district. Graglia, foolishly, never believed that his men would join the ranks of the strikers, and was therefore taken completely by surprise. At first he blustered and threatened, but the futility of his efforts became immediately evident, and in a moment of wild panic he dispatched a messenger to Casbenno clamoring for assistance.

When Villarosa heard of the news his decision was instantly taken. He had thoroughly studied the economic conditions of the district, and had come to the obvious conclusion that the demands of the peasants were more than justified. It was furthermore an excellent occasion to initiate that active movement of reform which he believed himself called upon to direct. So the Bishop had poor Don Paolino hustled out of the Roccolo, where he was absorbed in the reparation of his nets, and in spite of all that the worthy secretary could object, bundled him into the landau, briskly





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ordering the coachman to drive them to Corgeno as fast as his horses could trot, an injunction which greatly scandalised that fat and solemn dignitary, accustomed to proceed at a safe and majestic gait.

Villarosa was all animation and energy, with a youthful flush of color upon his delicate cheeks, as if the prospect of taking an active part in the impending struggle set his blood coursing more rapidly through his veins. Don Paolino, on the other hand, was the living antithesis of his master: he looked preternaturally wise and suspicious, and, after the first instinctive burst of protestation, remained abnormally silent and moody. This did not damp in the least the Bishop's eagerness, and he talked without ceasing as they drove down to the lake and round the bay to Capolago. It was terribly hot; the sun sparkled dazzlingly over the tranquil waters of the lake, so, when the hill of Bodio was reached, the Bishop, rather exhausted by the high temperature and the animation of his speech, was compelled to lean back and rest a while. Don Paolino then thought that his opportunity had come, and administered a severe lecture to his master:

"What did I tell your Excellency some weeks ago? That the peasants were beasts! My words have been proved exact, even sooner than I had



supposed. Now look: because the tenants of that young fool, Rizzi, have worked themselves up to what they call a strike, your own, whom all your life you have treated as if they were ornamental beings to be petted and spoiled, now turn against you, as they say, 'in sympathy for their oppressed brothers!' 'Oppressed brothers' forsooth! I'd give them 'sympathy,' and plenty of it—with the business end of a stick! Oh, if I only had my way! From time immemorial the scoundrels have worked for the same price and at the same conditions. Why do they want a change, all of a sudden? . . . They never made up all that nonsense by themselves, no, not they! It's your darling Don Davide, and his precious acolytes, and that mischief-making scribbler, Prina, who have created this unholy fuss! What is the world coming to, when one sees even a saint and a nobleman as your Excellency aiding and abetting a band of rebellious, noisy rabble against the legitimate owners? Your Excellency is silent! My words, no doubt, are exercising a salutary effect! I am now convinced that at Corgeno your Excellency will make short shrift of the ragamuffins, and that in three words you will put an end to this shameful fooling!"

The carriage was now running easily and



smoothly through the woods of the Rogorella, and the cool air gave new energy to Monsignore. He laughed pleasantly at Paolino's illusions concerning the effects of his sermon, then with good-natured but relentless irony he observed: "I would enjoy to see my Paolino mowing for thirteen hours under the scorching sun for the magnificent wage of one lira." Don Paolino threw up his arms heavenwards in scandalised protest, as if to convey his indignation for such a degrading supposition, but the Bishop only laughed again, and continued: "You are a big, strong man, my son, and it's only the merest chance that you are not among them! How would you enjoy the labor and the pay?" Then with one of his lightning changes of mood, he added with a great depth of feeling: "For shame, man, for shame! How can you be so cruel and relentless to your own flesh and blood?"

This *argumentum ad hominem* was well-nigh unanswerable, but the secretary would not admit his discomfiture, so with no little spite in his tone, he grumbled: "Brothers . . . brothers! Your Excellency always harps upon that argument. Of one thing I am all the same quite positive: I would not certainly act as *they* do!" Then he relapsed into his moody silence.



The carriage had passed through Inarzo, turning to the Lake of Varano, and they were now skirting the great meadows of the Brabbia, with its pools, near the old turf-bog, glittering as jewels in the sunlight. These were the meadows which the Rizzi peasantry had refused to mow, and their gorgeous mass of bloom was just beginning to wither on account of the great heat and drought of the preceding days. Paolino's native instinct was hurt to the quick as he instantly realised that a magnificent crop of hay was jeopardised by what he considered to be the wicked folly and obstinacy of the tenants. With a sweeping gesture he dramatically pointed out the meadows to Monsignore, and cried out indignantly: "Look at that! look at that! See—a couple of days more and all will be irretrievably ruined and lost! Oh, the scoundrels . . . the scoundrels!"

"Whom are you condemning?" the Bishop questioned, with scathing irony. "If it is those men who advised young Rizzi not to be just and humane with the poor toilers, then you and I are perfectly agreed."

This was too much even for Don Paolino's equanimity. He was about to burst forth with a violent philippic when the landau abruptly stopped short to allow another carriage driven at break-



neck speed to pass by. It was a *carretella*, a kind of rough, four-wheeled chaise, with an extraordinary tall and lanky mare in the shafts, lashed to furious speed by no less a personage than Don Felice Ranzi. Recognising the Bishop, the Curato of La Cascinetta reined in so violently and suddenly his Bucephalus that the poor animal almost squatted on its haunches, while its owner, bouncing in the midst of the dusty road, ran up to the landau. The priest was evidently almost frantic with excitement and accordingly very incoherent, but somehow he managed to stutter:

"Your Excellency is bound for Corgeno, I'm sure. It's high time to castigate these infamous rascals and thieves! We need troops, police, and let them shoot without mercy! It's two hundred quintals of hay, fourteen hundred lire of good money, I'm losing, and it's not your Excellency who'll make good! When you get to Corgeno you'll see the difference between sitting down to write Pastorals and facing those hounds as I did! They nearly stoned me at Lomazzo—the murderous beasts—and 'tis all due to the mad infatuation of your Excellency!"

This violent attack, so remarkably at variance with Ranzi's usual obsequiousness and servility, caused Monsignore to recoil as if struck, and it



required all of his self-control not to give the infuriated priest the lesson he so richly deserved. The Bishop realised that he would become involved in an undignified squabble on the open road and in the presence of servants, so he bit his lip and was just about to reply when Don Paolino, who, though sympathising with Ranzi inasmuch as he was a landlord, abhorred this "black-faced bully," jumped up so threateningly in defence of his beloved master that Ranzi, highly alarmed, sprang back a couple of steps and assumed a semi-defensive attitude. Purple, and shaking with anger, the secretary was going to speak when Villarosa silenced him with tranquil but irresistible dignity:

"Be silent, Paolino, and sit down at once! I make great allowances for your agitated condition, Don Felice, and will accordingly forget your disrespect. Remember that you are reaping what you have sown. Drive on, Giovanni."

The landau started at a rapid pace, leaving Don Felice gasping for rage in the middle of the road. When again capable of speech, he furiously shook his fist after the fast receding carriage, and hissed through his teeth: "Curse him and his secretary! What if I had told that stuck up old fool of his precious nephew's freaks with that divorced



female? But I'll pay them back!" Thus vowing vengeance, he slowly resumed his journey.

This painful incident cast a shadow upon the rest of the drive: Villarosa and Don Paolino were silent and preoccupied until they reached Corgeno, not more than a couple of miles farther. Usually when a carriage rumbled through the narrow street, paved with cobblestones, men, women, and children used to rush out tumultuously from the houses to witness the somewhat unfrequent spectacle. And when it happened to be the "master," there ever was a great uncovering of heads and waving of hands, while all countenances were wreathed in smiles, and most of the onlookers ran after the carriage to be the first to speak to his Excellency and obtain his blessing. This time the picture was startlingly different. The houses looked empty and deserted, as if closed up and barred in sullen silence. Not a soul in the street, only an old crony or two, who shambled along and bowed as if from sheer force of habit.

This unexpected reception sent a great chill through Villarosa's heart, and Don Paolino ejaculated an eloquent "Holy Virgin!" under his breath. The Bishop had ever been loved by his peasants as much as their selfish temperaments and their stunted moral growth would allow,



especially as their master's perfect life and the tenderness of his sacerdotal ministrations had impressed them with profound, yet undefined, sentiments of awe and respect. Of course, and in spite of all these feelings, they were ever remorselessly ready to take undue advantage of his kindness; but that was part of their natures, the unconscious consequence of the law of reprisal, handed down to them by an immemorial heredity of ignorance and oppression, although in this case it was qualified by a mutual good-humor and tolerance, as if the peasants wished to say: "We know you know, and you know we know!"

In this guise they reached the old mansion, ambitiously known as the Castello, when the carriage had to stop short, instead of driving straight in. Contrarily to the unfailing habit, the massive gates of the garden were carefully locked and barred, so that the footman had to bang vigorously upon them to awaken the attention of the inmates. The Bishop, who looked extremely displeased with these extraordinary measures, turned rather sharply upon the white-bearded overseer who came to open, demanding an explanation, when Graglia and his wife rushed out breathlessly to welcome the master.



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Then, before the Bishop could open his mouth, the *fattore* poured out in an unending stream his thanks for his Excellency's immediate and un-hoped for arrival. However, the very exaggeration of the terms made the speech sound much less genuine than intended, and Monsignore, still laboring under the unpleasant impression caused by the sombre aspect of his village and by the closed gates of the Castello, repeatedly waved his hand in an attempt to stem the torrent. But it was in vain, so, at last, he interrupted the *fattore* by exclaiming, not too patiently: "That's right, Mario, that's all right. I'm here, of course I'm here, and I want to hear all about it, but quietly and in reply to my questions. So let's go at once to the office, and have it out!"

This plan, however, did not appear to please either Graglia or his wife, for the latter, expressing great concern about the material welfare of his Excellency, urged that he should first partake of some light refreshment, and then rest for a while after the long and dusty drive. Although strongly sustained by Don Paolino, who was thoroughly acquainted with her housekeeping abilities, the lady failed to tempt Villarosa, who never relished overmuch the showy airs of "la Signora Graglia," and so he assured her, cour-



teously though peremptorily, that he was neither thirsty nor tired.

That sorely discomfited lady having departed, the Bishop, followed by Graglia and Don Paolino, adjourned at once to the cosy apartment, named "office," in which the books were kept and the business of the estate transacted. Monsignore sat in the arm-chair usually occupied by the *fattore*, at the great table strewn with circulars, seedsmen's catalogues, and other miscellaneous scraps of paper, with the other two occupying chairs in front of him. According to his habit, as soon as seated, Monsignore picked up the first bit of paper within reach of his hand, and kept mechanically playing with it, not noticing in the least the repressed gesture of fear which escaped the *fattore*.

Graglia, in reply to his master's inquiries, then exposed his views on the situation. It was a most ticklish subject to treat, and needed all his wits to steer prudently among the dangerous rocks and quicksands it metaphorically presented. Graglia was of course fully aware of the Bishop's opinions, of the approval and of the protection he had unstintingly granted to Don Davide Capelletti and to his association, but, on the other hand, he was convinced that the situation required resolute



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and radical remedies which would in future deter the peasants from such perilous agitations. However, the *fattore* committed one very serious error. Because Villarosa had never interfered with the management of the estate and was the easiest man to deal with he had ever met, Graglia thoroughly misjudged his power of penetration, while, not unnaturally, for he had but his own inferior standard of morals to go by, he imagined that the damage inflicted to the Bishop's personal interests would effectively upset all the prelate's "humanitarian nonsense" and make him consider the peasants' agitation in a very different light.

Villarosa listened patiently and with unflagging attention to the minute description of all the particulars of the unexpected strike, nor even seeming to notice the sundry covert hints and thrusts about the Peasants' League. By *esprit de corps*, if for no other reasons, Graglia steadfastly maintained that the agents of the Rizzi estate, not only had been fair and honest in their treatment of the peasants, but that they had ever been most considerate and kind. As to the demeanor of his own people, no words were strong enough to brand the boundless wickedness of their conduct, considering the exaggerated, and almost ridiculous leniency with which they had ever been treated.



On this subject Graglia dilated at great length, while Don Paolino with a most eloquent mimicry implicitly approved the *fattore's* philippic.

At last Graglia closed his lengthy oration, and Villarosa, with a very audible sigh of relief, replied: "You have given us a very clear and complete statement of the facts, Mario, from your point of view. But, while I thank you for it, I wish to hear the other side. It is only justice I should, so send at once for the Board of the Corgeno League, which, according to you, managed this strike, and let us hear what *they* have to say!"

The *fattore's* jaw fell most expressively, and Don Paolino shrugged his shoulders as if in hopeless despair, but the calm, though unanswerable, authority with which those words had been uttered left no loophole of escape. Though Graglia, it must be remembered, was by no means one of the most unjust and thieving members of his class, yet he had upon his conscience numberless deeds of petty spoliation and partiality, which he feared would be exposed, so he "hemmed" and "haw'd" for a moment, but under the cold, unswerving glance of the master, he had no alternative but to obey. The *fattore* left the room and was heard in the passage mumbling directions to the overseer; then there came the sound of a more



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distant voice, stormily remonstrating. La Signora Graglia was evidently berating her husband as a bungler and a fool.

As Graglia re-entered the office announcing that his Excellency's orders had been obeyed, Villarosa casually looked at the letter with which he had been toying, and saw that it was directed to "The Administration of the Villarosa Estate." He perused it rapidly, then read it over a second time with profound attention. It was an invitation to Graglia, in his quality of *fattore* of Corgeno, to be present at a private meeting of the principal landlords of the district for the purpose of preparing a collective and stringent action against the strikers. This meeting was convened for eleven o'clock next day at the Castle of Taino, belonging to the Marchese Longhi, and was called by a "committee," at the head of which was Conte Lorenzo Meravigli, universally known for his great territorial wealth, his tyrannical rule of the peasants, his insufferable *suffisance*, and his rabid clericalism.

In a flash Villarosa saw through the clever machination. The promoters, well aware of the attitude he had assumed towards the claims of the Christian Democrats, were loath to let him know of their plans, but as it would have been unwise not to



include in their list such an important landlord as himself, they decided to address the invitation to the *fattore*, whom they knew to be heart and soul with them. They obtained thus the double advantage of eliminating the very awkward possibility of the Bishop's presence at their meeting, and of compromising him irremediably, as nobody would imagine that his representative had acted without his express authorisation and mandate. As most people, they had fallen into the error of imagining that Villarosa's attitude was merely the outcome of a desire to create "a noise" around himself, and that all this "fuss," as they called it, would disappear when his own landed interests were at stake. Now a mere chance had upset their deep-laid plans. Before the terrible flash of anger in the Bishop's eyes, Graglia caught his breath with a gasp and sunk his head in abject confusion and terror. Don Paolino, fully in the dark, of course, looked from one to the other in a vain attempt to comprehend what had occurred, then at last the ominous silence was broken by the clarion-like tones of Villarosa's voice, which rang out with startling force:

"You would have gone to this meeting without consulting me—without even mentioning the fact that it had been called? You would have



taken pledges in my name and decided upon what ought to be done without my orders or my consent—aye, against them! That was an able move, no doubt, and, I will add, a rascally one, both on your part and on that of the promoters of the meeting! But God has prevented this iniquity, and all is for the best, for I, myself, the owner of Corgeno, will be present to-morrow at Taino! I advise you, sir, that if upon another occasion you wish to deceive your employer, you must take better care and not forget such compromising documents!”

Graglia turned as pale as a sheet: there was no overestimating the gravity of the accusation, and the tone of the impeachment made it still more serious. Never before had Villarosa addressed him by the term of “sir,” and he lost all control over himself. In a rush of angry words, he violently denounced the peasants, who had repeatedly threatened him and his, so that he went in fear of his life and had been forced to barricade the gates to protect the inmates of the Castello. It was impossible for him to continue in his work; the very master who ought to uphold his authority was openly undermining it and setting it at naught. Monsignore would rue the day before long, but then it would be too late!



Don Paolino's face, during this impassioned harangue, was a study to behold; he was evidently torn asunder by his love for Villarosa and by his own convictions, which tallied entirely with Graglia's words. He wished to resent the violent onslaught upon his idol, yet found no satisfactory words with which to do so. So he kept on gesticulating at random, in the wild hope of stemming the flood.

The Bishop, his handsome face aflame with unmitigated defiance and contempt, did not utter a word until the *fattore* had to stop short for lack of breath, then in those cold, calm tones, which, being remarkably infrequent with him, invested his words with supreme aloofness and dignity, he replied: "I think, sir, that I have heard quite enough. You are no longer a fit person to supervise my estate, and I question now whether you were ever such. Your deception settles the question, and as you consider your life and that of your family in peril, you will leave Corgeno at once. Your services are no longer needed; henceforth I will manage the estate myself."

This unexpected decision was so radical that Don Paolino, in genuine dismay, rose to his feet, overturning his chair, and cried out: "Your Excellency—your Excellency! Think! Consider!"



One imperious sign of the Bishop's hand, one fierce look of his expressive eyes silenced the poor secretary so thoroughly that he fell back, crushed and mortified. As to Graglia, he was annihilated. He had, to be sure, a very comfortable fortune accumulated by his father's fifty years of plunder, and greatly increased by his own, so the financial consequences of his dismissal, though of course entailing a serious diminution of income, did not dismay him; it was the loss of prestige and social status inherent to the position of *fattore* for the powerful and highly revered Villarosa family which he could not stomach. So at first he protested, then tried to play upon Villarosa's tender heart. He recalled the secular and devoted services of his family, lachrymosely pointing out that as a recompense for these he was now ruthlessly thrown on the bounty of the world.

Monsignore never wavered for a moment; however, with inveterate kindness he hastened to add that it was his intention to pension him off handsomely, so that not only he would financially lose very little, but his dismissal could not be adversely commented upon and imputed to damaging causes. This assurance went a long way to soothe the *fattore*, though he still occasionally snivelled



plaintively and mopped his tear-stained face with a huge colored handkerchief.

Then there came a discreet knock at the door, and the old overseer ushered in a group of seven peasants, the local Board of the League. All of them were men in the prime of life, though looking years older than their age, because of their lifelong exposure to the weather and the hard and unceasing labor to which they had been submitted from their earliest childhood. Clumsily they slouched in, twirling their battered hats in their gnarled fingers, and, as there had been no time for them to go home from the fields out of which they had been hastily summoned, their opened shirts exposed their shaggy breasts and knotty, sun-baked arms. It was impossible to read upon their countenances any signs of what was going on in their brains; their stolid and listless faces were as barred and closed as their houses, this impenetrable blankness being their one invulnerable armor against those above them, whom an immemorial atavism had taught them to consider as their worst and natural enemies. Their shifting, unsteady eyes persistently frustrated all efforts to fix them, and from the very first it was painfully evident that they would do their utmost not to vouchsafe an explicit reply to a definite question.



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At the bottom of it all an ancient, pent-up accumulation of hatred could be detected, a hatred stored up and gloated upon through countless generations, and which was now assuming an aggressive form as the consciousness of the gigantic though untutored power of their numbers had begun to filter down through the dark, unexplored recesses of their elemental souls.

Villarosa, however, stood in an exceptional position. The years during which he had been their Curato and the loving care of his religious ministrations were still uncanceled from their minds. He had baptised, confessed, married most of these men, and all remembered him by the deathbed of some one very dear to them. Then the fact that he was a Bishop, a high dignitary of that Church the influence of which was paramount among them, gave still greater weight to his personal authority. In these conditions, Monsignore set hopefully and patiently to the task of overcoming their stony diffidence; he addressed each man in turn by his Christian name, and, of course, in their own harsh dialect, this very simple artifice being that which more than any other could overcome their repellent shyness.

Though never losing sight of the aim in view, Villarosa did not go straight to the point, well



knowing that in so doing he would lose all chances of success; he first made many inquiries about their families and affairs, with that wonderful quickness of memory which seems to be one of the great innate gifts peculiar to those destined to rule the masses. But from the first it seemed as if he was doomed to fail, as even his all-conquering charm had no effect upon their sullen defensiveness. Don Paolino from his corner gave visible and unmistakable signs of indignation, for he was worked up to boiling-point by such hardness of heart. Graglia, moody and frowning, appeared as totally disinterested in the whole affair, though in a subdolous fashion, he had repeatedly tried to catch the eye of some one of the members of the deputation, hoping vaguely that his erstwhile dreaded authority would compel them to modify their eventual replies or at least to be cautiously non-committal. The peasants were, however, too much upon their guard; they studiously avoided even to look at him, and the conference would have lagged pitifully if unawares Don Paolino had not brought it to a climax. Unable to restrain himself any longer at the sight of his own younger brother, who looked even more unresponsive than the others, he suddenly addressed him pointedly by name, crying out at the top of his voice:



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"Peppino, you blockhead, can't you answer straight out when the master asks you a question?"

This happened so suddenly and unexpectedly that the Bishop had no chance of silencing his secretary, as he would undoubtedly have done, fearing that this ill-timed burst of anger might stultify all his efforts. But to his relief, Monsignore saw that just the opposite had taken place; the rough and energetic appeal of one who almost belonged to their numbers spurred them on to open speech. The president of the local League, a little old man with a keen, furrowed face and shrewd, deep-set eyes, stepped forward and addressed the master. At first he spoke brokenly and almost incomprehensibly, then, seeing the deep interest depicted on Villarosa's sensitive face, the newly acquired consciousness of the wrongs so long withstood by his class lent him words and the courage to utter them. And as he spoke a certain rude and primitive eloquence became apparent, which filled the *fattore's* heart with rage and dismay, and sorely perplexed Don Paolino.

All the acts of favoritism, the undue pressures, the robberies, large and small, the lack of consideration and humanity, the moral abuse, were poured forth in an appalling array. Never impeachment of an entire system was more thorough



or more pitiless in its unadorned simplicity, and the Bishop's high sense of justice was shocked to its profoundest fibres. And as he proceeded the peasant did not spare the landowners themselves: they had ever lived aloof from those who were their dependents, as if in another world, in a contented oblivion of their duties, even the kindest among them, even those admired for their charity and generosity. What did the landlords know about their peasants, their feelings and their aspirations? Had they ever endeavored to win their confidence and love by that real brotherhood which is not merely restricted to the doling out of alms or to self-glorifying gifts on solemn occasions? No, they had ever profited by their incessant work without troubling about the hardships it entailed, they had maintained their fastuous luxury upon the sweat of the toilers, with less consideration and thought than they gave the horses in their stables, far better housed and fed than their tenants, and now even the most hard-hearted and cruel among the landlords babbled of thanklessness and ingratitude on the peasants' part! But a new dawn had risen! An inspiring message of hope had reached them in their misery, a message of better days to come, and they were going to realise its promises at all costs, for it had



been conveyed to them by the voice of their pastors, the representatives upon earth of God Himself, who, by intercession of the Blessed Virgin, had taken pity at last on their anguish and suffering!

The old man stopped at last from sheer exhaustion, for never before in his whole existence had he uttered so many words at one stretch, and there came a subdued murmur of approbation from his colleagues, who closed instinctively around him as if to shield him from the revengeful fury of the *fattore*, and, may be, from that of the master. They had grossly misjudged Villarosa and were culpably ignorant of the nobility of his great soul. Even they, as the landlords whom they so bitterly denounced, had never cared to penetrate its inwardness, and had always kept it, as it were, at arm's-length from their own.

Villarosa understood it all. He was far from being angry against the peasants, but the words which had fallen from the lips of that untutored old man had sunken deeply into the recesses of his heart, never to be forgotten. More than ever he was convinced that a Heaven-sent mission had been assigned to him, more than ever he was ready to sacrifice all to the great cause he had espoused. With his expressive face suffused by a blush of



honest shame and indignation, with his eyes ablaze with the fire of a great resolution, he stepped forward and laid his shapely hand on the shoulder of the uncouth and rugged peasant. Slowly, with a commanding sweetness, his words broke the heavy silence reigning in the room:

“I thank you, my good Centeu. Not in my whole life will I forget a single one of your words. Know ye all that I humbly declare that I have erred as much as the other landlords, nay, more than them all, because neither as your shepherd nor as your master have I fully accomplished my duty. Now all will change, I pledge you my solemn word, and we must henceforth work together for the common good. Be as truthful, as thoughtful, and as charitable as you are strong, and, with God’s help, we will redress all evils.”

A short pause ensued: even the peasants understood that a great victory was theirs, a victory obtained, not by their force, but vouchsafed to them by a man whom they had believed a natural enemy, and whose ideals soared far above their comprehension. Then, lifting majestically his right hand to impart the Benediction, Villarosa saw them all fall heavily to their knees and devoutly bend their heads to receive it. The sonorous Latin of the rubric rang melodiously in the



deep silence, and then the deputation filed out on the tips of their toes, crossing themselves devoutly, as if they were coming out of church.

When the Bishop, Don Paolino, and Graglia were once more alone, for a while no one spoke, then, almost simultaneously, Don Paolino and Graglia came forward as if to speak, but Monsignore, his nerves still tingling under the impressions he had experienced, turned imperiously upon them, and in a tone which brooked of no reply, nipped in the bud their evidently polemical intentions.

“Not a word more!” he thundered; “do not forget that I, and I alone, am the master here.” And without deigning to look round, he stalked out of the office.



## CHAPTER V

### THE MEETING AT TAINO CASTLE

A FEW hours later Guido cantered up the main street of Corgeno, and found the villagers in a wild state of excitement, such as he had never witnessed before. He knew them to be rather a surly set, stolid, unresponsive creatures, devoid of enthusiasm, sympathy, and even feeling, so he was by no means prepared to find the small, irregularly shaped square in front of the family mansion thronged with men, women, and children, who almost fought to enter the gates, and were shouting themselves hoarse with piercing cries of "Viva Monsignore!" alternating with others of "Abasso i Graglia!" They opened a lane to let him pass through, many of his boy friends grinning broadly as he went by, while the girls dug each other in the ribs at the sight of the good-looking officer. But, superficial observer though he was, with his mind preoccupied and worried by many doubts and fears, he could not help



noticing a sudden and subtle transformation which had taken place in the peasants' demeanor. It was far less cringing and subservient, but also remarkably less respectful and considerate; there was a sort of triumphant irony in their greeting, something that grated disagreeably upon his nerves and roused his hereditary instincts of absolute domination. He felt that he would have been inclined to charge the rabble with his hunting-crop and give them a thrashing, but that the same rabble would turn upon him and tear him to pieces.

He dismounted before the hall, handed his horse to the footman, who stood rather sheepishly guarding the entrance, bidding him to take the mare to the stables and see that she should be well attended to. Then he ran up the steps and, unannounced, made his way to the larger sitting-room, from which strange sounds of wailing and crying were issuing, together with the rumble of many voices. As he opened the door a somewhat ludicrous sight caused him to stop short on the threshold, undecided what to do.

Monsignore was standing in the middle of the rather empty room, and the Signora Graglia, on her knees before him, had surrounded his lower limbs with her plump and shapely arms, as if



trying to hide her tearful face within the ample folds of the episcopal gown, while she moaned and sobbed and shrieked that his Excellency must save her poor Mario and herself. Villarosa's handsome and refined countenance was a picture to look at; the blush overspreading his cheeks brightened and rejuvenated his eyes, while dignity and humor played around his sensitive mouth as he tried to preserve his equilibrium and his *sérieux*, both greatly endangered by the onslaught of the buxom matron. Don Paolino was attempting to loosen forcibly the tightening grip of the lady, and admonishing her at the top of his voice that the floor was slippery and she would make Monsignore tumble, while in a corner Graglia stood bellowing "Holy Mother!" at regular intervals.

Guido, hardly restraining his hilarity, relieved the situation by his timely arrival; seeing him, the Bishop managed to tear himself from that forcible embrace, and hurried towards his nephew, exclaiming: "Arrived at last! I'm happy to see you, as your presence is much needed, and I have much to tell you." Then, turning to the Graglias, he continued in a studiously matter-of-fact manner: "You had better now prepare for your departure; you have absolutely nothing to fear; the peasants are only expressing rather noisily their



opinions, and in a few minutes I will see to it myself that they all return peaceably to their houses; so there's nothing to interfere with you."

The Signora Graglia and her worthy spouse, in spite of all that had taken place, persisted in believing that the Bishop's decision of dismissing them was due only to a momentary irritation, occasioned by the discovery of the trick which was to be played upon himself; and that, notwithstanding his fine words to the League's deputation, his instincts of aristocrat and landlord would undoubtedly prevail in the end and he would ask them to remain. But the cool, businesslike manner in which Monsignore was settling all for their immediate exodus dispelled this illusion, and accordingly the signora's suppliant attitude was instantly transformed into one of coarse and bold defiance. "Come along and pack, Mario," she sneered addressing her husband, but really meaning it for Villarosa. "When counts and cut-throats combine, and Garibaldini rule the Church, it's high time for God-fearing folk to get out of the way." And she bounced out of the room, with her husband at her heels, before any one could reply, though both Guido and Don Paolino had sprung indignantly forward.

But the Bishop did not seem either irritated



or struck by the words of the woman; he slightly nodded to himself as if in confirmation of something he had always suspected. He touched restrainingly his nephew's arm, and whispered to him: "*Qui de gladio ferit, de gladio perit!*" then louder he went on: "Now, I will say a few words to those good children outside, later we will hold counsel. Paolino, my son, do not look so glum, for Heaven's sake! Remember that the peasants are fully in the right, and we, the landlords, in the wrong, that this wrong has lasted for centuries and centuries, and . . . so come on both of you."

Outside the crowd had grown even more compact and was indefatigably alternating its cries of "*Viva Villarosa!*" and "*Abasso i Graglia!*" But it was a strangely disciplined crowd; not a flower in the old-fashioned parterres had been plucked or trampled, men going even so far as to unmercifully cuff any urchin attempting to purloin a blossom. When Monsignore appeared on the terrace one unanimous, tremendous shout of "*Viva Villarosa!*" thundered out from the crowd, then, as by a preconcerted arrangement, an instant and solemn silence prevailed, the more striking that it followed without transition a great volume of noise. The Bishop looked with great affection, not wholly unmixed with pride, down upon the



crowd he apparently dominated so thoroughly, then his voice swelled in the expecting hush.

"My children," he said, "Centeu and the other boys must have told you what I think of your just complaints. You and I are going to work hand in hand to correct all that is wrong; we can do it easily, but only on condition that perfect trust and confidence should reign between us. Now, children, go home! Graglia is leaving in a few minutes; as a proof of our understanding, let him depart without a murmur; remember he acted according to his best lights, and that you can afford to be generous. Now go!" And again he raised his right hand, with the index and medium extended.

Instantly the crowd reverently knelt with almost military simultaneousness, and the Bishop slowly and impressively imparted the Benediction, after which the crowd shouted one more resonant "Viva Villarosa!" and disbanded with startling rapidity. In a very few minutes the garden, the square in front of the mansion, and even the streets were deserted and not a soul to be seen.

From the terrace Villarosa watched complacently this absolute obedience to his orders; he turned smilingly upon Don Paolino, standing by his side, patted him affectionately on the shoulder,



crying with exultation: "See, you everlasting croaker, see? These people whom you libel so shockingly are strong and good and generous, if you only know how to treat them. Educate and develop them, and they will truly become the backbone and sinew of our country. Admit for once that you are in the wrong!"

The perturbed countenance of the secretary did not clear; still frowning heavily, he shook his head dejectedly and replied: "May Heaven will that your Excellency should be right! They are obedient and devoted . . . to-day . . . the wily wretches; they can afford it . . . as they have won; but wait a little while . . . and then you'll see. You'll hear another tune, and no mistake!"

Monsignore impatiently waved his hand. The stubborn obstinacy of Don Paolino, who, he instinctively felt, must have a profound knowledge of his race, born and bred in him, disconcerted and troubled him, for it sapped at the same time his innocent vanity and the noble aspirations of his altruistic nature. So, especially after giving a free wing to both, it hurt him keenly to admit, even if it was only to his own innermost conscience, that there must be a large amount of truth in Don Paolino's adverse predictions. In a



hurried fashion he therefore directed the conversation to other channels.

"All is now settled. Of course, Graglia has his own trap and horse, and they must be going to La Cascinetta, as the signora owns her father's old home. Their luggage and furniture will go to-morrow with our carts . . . and that's ended, anyhow. You, Guido, my boy, must accompany them to the end of the village, though it's perfectly useless. The peasants will not stir. They are implicit in their obedience. When you have done, join us at once, for I still have much to tell you."

Guido did not relish overmuch the mission entrusted to him; he was not in any way biassed concerning the Graglias, but he never had liked them, and at the same time he could not wholly approve of this sudden dismissal, though, of course, he ignored its motives. Accustomed, however, to obey unquestioningly his uncle's orders, he rapidly went over to the stables, and found there the overseer harnessing Graglia's horse and preparing his trap. The old man, seeing the Contino, whom he had known since he had been brought to Corgeno, a wee mite, unburdened himself to him of his sombre forebodings; he felt part and parcel of the old and now shattered order of things, and despondingly feared that he, too, must leave;



but, by instinct and training a sort of human watchdog, he remained unswervingly loyal to Graglia, whom he considered by a comprehensible though mistaken sentiment even more his master than Monsignore himself. Guido at once proceeded to assuage the old man's fears:

"Tut, tut, Girola! Of course uncle cannot do without you—you, the best overseer of the entire Varesotto. Don't be idiot, man; you'll never leave Corgeno; no fear of that!"

The overseer paused an instant in his work, mopped his forehead, uncovering his heavy mop of white hair, and, stroking pensively his big silvery beard, confidentially murmured: "The end of the world is near, Contino, and no mistake. I was seventy-five last Martinmas, and I mayn't live to see it; but 'tis at hand all the same! To think that there's not going to be a Graglia, *fattore* of Corgeno, any longer; that the master, and he a Count and a Bishop, is siding with those lazy good-for-nothings the peasants! I'll stay all right if his Excellency allows it, but from now henceforth it is mighty little I will be able to do to keep those ragamuffins within reasonable bounds."

He would have said more, but at that moment the door of the Graglia's kitchen was violently



thrown open, and Signora Graglia sailed forth, looking quite the lady in her silk dress and flowered hat, followed by her disconcerted and rather frightened-looking husband. As she came out she flashed from her large, bold black eyes a glance at the good-looking officer, which he rightly interpreted, remembering the rather disreputable tales current about her, then, with the greatest ease, she walked up to him.

"We are going," she said, "and we are going home. Thank Heaven we still have a roof over our heads, though no thanks for it to those for whom the Graglias have slaved during a century!" Then, seeing an ominous frown gather upon the young man's brow, womanlike she shunted to another track: "And if in your rides, Signor Contino, you pass by La Cascinetta, I will be proud to welcome you to anything there is in the house."

Guido rather stiffly bowed his thanks, and, turning to the *fattore*, who was fussily engaged in a wholly superfluous examination of the harness, said in a matter-of-fact and rather curt fashion: "If you're ready, Graglia, we'll go. Uncle wishes me to escort you out of the village, though he thinks it quite unnecessary; so please walk the horse that I may keep up. Ready, eh?"



"My heart is breaking . . . to leave Corgeno, where I was born and bred, and at my age . . . to be thrown thus on the mercy of the world! Don't you think, Signor Contino, that I have been treated——"

"I'm obeying orders, not thinking, Graglia, so better drop that subject; it's wiser!" Guido interrupted him even more curtly. Then in a milder voice he added: "Let's be off."

There was no misunderstanding the officer's peremptory directions, so Graglia bundled his wife rather unceremoniously into the trap, and clambered up after her. The horse, a seasoned animal, soberly walked along, and Guido had no difficulty in keeping on by the side, while from under the raised hood of the vehicle the *fattore* peered out suspiciously, his whip ready to start his horse at a gallop if anything threatening hove in sight. But there was not a soul in the street, and the strange silence of the twilight hour, during which it was usually crowded by gossiping groups who sat on their respective doorsteps discussing their evening meal, was almost uncanny. The Bishop was right, Guido thought, and Graglia seemed rather disappointed, for the sly fox well knew how much he could have banked upon the cries of a hooting crowd with a few stones flying.



Out of the village they stopped a moment to lower the hood, as the signora complained of the stifling closeness. Guido touched his cap, and retraced his steps, while the trap disappeared in a cloud of dust.

When the young man got back to the Castello it was almost dark, and he found his uncle and Don Paolino engaged in what appeared to be an animated discussion, in which the former did not seem to have the best, as was generally the case. The fact was that Monsignore was almost exhausted by the drive in the hot sun, the excitement of the day, and his neglect to take any food since early that morning. He leaned wearily back in a stiff arm-chair, looking wan and pale, with broad purple rings under his eyes, from which all animation and brilliancy had vanished, and submitted almost passively to the tide of reproach and advice which flowed from the lips of Don Paolino. The good secretary was now having his innings, and was making up for the silence to which he had been condemned for so long. Guido's entrance cut him short in the middle of a sentence, and, anticipating their questions, the young man replied at once:

"The peasants might all be dead or gone away; not a cat in sight, not a sound, not a breath! I



fancy that Graglia was rather sick about it, for he looked as if pining for a moderate dose of martyrdom." Then, struck by his uncle's appearance, he continued, with deep concern in his tone: "Uncle, you look tired and worn out, and I bet that Don Paolino, instead of thinking of your supper and rest, has been arguing with you, according to his habit!"

Villarosa struggled a little straighter in his chair, and, disclaiming all fatigue, launched into a review of all that had happened; but Guido would not allow him to utter another word. He hustled the secretary out of the room, and accompanied him on a foraging expedition, which had excellent results, so that in less than half an hour later the three were discussing a toothsome though improvised meal and a bottle of the celebrated Corgeno vintage, of which, despite his protests, the Bishop was forced by his nephew's insistence to drink his share.

The rest, the good food, and the generous wine had their usual effect: Villarosa, whose nervous temperament responded instantly to the treatment, regained all his energy and presence of mind. Rapidly and effectively he informed Guido of all that had happened, more than once cutting short the tendentious remarks that Don Paolino



attempted to smuggle into the narrative. The officer, upon the whole, approved of all Monsignore had said and done; he expressed his opinion of Don Felice's attack and of Graglia's peccadilloes and duplicity in terms more military than choice, although, in the *fattore's* case, he reserved most of his forcible expressions for "that contemptible hound Meravigli" and "that weak ass Longhi."

"But," Guido concluded, "after making all due allowances for their many grievances, I must confess that I have a strong feeling that the peasants are crowing over us; they have had the best of us in every respect, and are certainly not going to rest contented with what they have obtained. We, and those who think as we do, will probably give in again and again; the rest, willy-nilly, must follow, so one fine day we will find ourselves confronted by the awful dilemma either of making a present of our lands to the peasants or of shooting them down mercilessly by the thousand! And if the advice of such black-faced rascals as Ranzi and Meravigli were to prevail right now, the country would be steeped in blood to-morrow!"

"That's Gospel truth, and no mistake!" fervently cried Don Paolino, "although I cannot persuade his Excellency. Give once the peasants



the paring of your nail and they'll take the arm and the rest of the body, too, if they can! A good sound thrashing would bring them back to their right senses, and the sooner they get it the better! Here, for instance, the *carabinieri* ought to put the bracelets on that old fox Centeu, and take him and his precious committee to jail!"

"Including your brother Peppino, is it not so?" Villarosa interrupted, with the nearest approach to a sneer that he was capable of. Then with one of his lightning changes of mood he burst forth: "Woe unto you who call yourselves professing Christians, who deny Christ every day of your lives, and place your material interests, your selfish motives, your greed of pelf far above the covenant you made with your Master to work, aye, to suffer if needs be for the triumph of truth and justice and the blessed brotherhood of mankind! In your blind terror of losing something which has come to you through violence and oppression you would make our streams run red with blood, and fill the poor homes around us with widows and orphans! Shame, shame upon you! . . . And, moreover, you lie to your own selves and conjure up imaginary dangers so as to justify in your own eyes the ruthless cruelty of your repression! . . . And even, admitting for one



moment that which I most strenuously deny, if the peasants one day became the masters of the soil through adjustments evolved by wise and prudent men, would it not be but justice, but the restitution of the wrongly extorted, but the fulfilment of Christ's promise to the down-trodden, the poor, and the humble?"

Monsignore had risen to his feet, carried away by the intensity of his conviction that he had been chosen to redress these wrongs, and by that ardent flame of passionate self-sacrifice which formed the groundwork of his personality. The hanging lamp threw a halo around his silver locks, and his handsome face stood out in bold relief upon the dark wainscoting of the room, so spiritualised, so exquisitely serene that Guido and Don Paolino both felt small and mean and pitiful, although they could not admit their point of view to be erroneous. And, on the other hand, this impression had a far-reaching consequence; it prevented Guido from disclosing the secret nearest to his heart, his engagement to Donna Delia Leoni. To be quite candid, it would have been at all times a difficult topic to approach, but how much more so with some one who seemed so far aloof from the passions of our poor earth! This unusual fit of cowardice made the boy jump with eagerness



at the very plausible excuse that "Ziggio" was too much worried, preoccupied, and tired out to be tormented with his own private affairs. So, fatally, he put off his confession to a future occasion, little imagining the consequences of this act.

A little later Guido and Don Paolino prevailed upon Monsignore that he should retire. The other two sat up a while smoking a last cigar, but notwithstanding the secretary's efforts to make the officer take further interest in the questions of the day, he was inclined to muse and be silent. It was, however, arranged between them that Don Paolino should keep the young officer minutely informed of all that would happen, especially at Taino. Next morning, as Guido had before him a three-mile walk to the nearest station, he went very early to his uncle's room and bade him good-bye while the old gentleman was still busy with his toilet; again there was neither the time nor the opportunity of revealing his love, for Monsignore was much too absorbed in the thought of the coming ordeal and too intent girding his loins for the impending fight to notice the embarrassed demeanor and melancholy pallor of his beloved nephew.

Villarosa dressed with more than his usual care, donning his broadest violet sash with heavy gold



tassels, and as he placed his violet *mozzetta* upon his rippling silver curls and took up his *tricorno*, trimmed with gold and violet cord, Don Paolino knocked at his door and was admitted at once. The good secretary had persisted in hoping against hope that Monsignore would decide at the last moment not to go to Taino, but when he caught sight of him, arrayed as for the most solemn occasions, his heart sank, and it was with the most woe-begone expression that he bade a dolorous-toned "Good-morning" to his master. The old gentleman, on the contrary, was in the highest of spirits; he scented powder, and the mere prospect of a possible battle was the best tonic that he could have taken. His "Villarosa temper" was thoroughly aroused, and the night which had intervened between his decision and its fulfilment, instead of toning down his just resentment, had intensified it because of the unavoidable restraint.

"What a glorious morning for our drive, Paolino!" the Bishop exclaimed in his cheeriest tones, but with a clarion-like distinctness which sent cold shivers down the secretary's back, for he well knew what they meant. "You have, no doubt, given the necessary orders to Giovanni, and the carriage will be round in a few minutes; we have a good two hours' journey before us, and



as the meeting is convened for eleven, it will be none too early to start at half-past eight."

"But . . . your Excellency never gave me any orders about the carriage last night!" Don Paolino equivocated with the desperation of a drowning man catching at a straw; "and I think that Giovanni must have gone to Varano to have one of the horses shod, as it seems it nearly cast a shoe yesterday. It will take at least a couple of hours . . . so, of course, it's out of the question to arrive at Taino in time . . . and——"

The secretary, rather surprised at Monsignore's silence, lifted his eyes, which, till then, he had kept studiously fixed on the floor. Monsignore was no longer there. In a bound Don Paolino was at the French window, opening on to the garden, just in time to see Monsignore striding vigorously towards the stables; he heard him calling for the coachman in a voice which rang all over the place. Terrified and humiliated, Don Paolino rushed after his master, to find him roundly berating Giovanni for a laggard and hustling him in a fashion which nearly drove that majestic personage to frenzy. When Villarosa saw Paolino he turned upon him, to the great relief of the coachman, but he checked at once the burning reproof that came to his lips. In



spite of all he would never condescend to scold his faithful secretary before servants, so he simply said, "Breakfast is ready, Don Paolino," fixing him, however, with such flaming eyes that the poor man groaned audibly and mopped the heavy beads of perspiration which burst out on his forehead.

The ensuing meal was, as Don Paolino later confessed to Dr. Sandri, one of the worst moments of agony he had experienced in his whole life; Monsignore sat bolt upright in his chair, looking sternly in front of him and beyond his secretary, as if through him, studiously ignoring his presence. But the twitching of those sensitive lips, the sudden flushes of color that came and went over his cheeks, told of the tempest raging in him. Then, as suddenly, the storm dissipated, a malicious smile began to form at the humorous corners of his mouth, and soon spread, as in ripples, over his countenance.

"Giovanni said: 'Don Paolino would have had me ride to Varano to shoe the mare, as if I did not know my business and had not looked after everything before leaving Casbenno.' " Monsignore, with elaborate impersonality, had addressed this quotation to nobody in particular, but now he fixed his victim straight in the eyes



and went on in a tone of pitying sweetness which cut him to the quick: "Missed again this time, Paolino, have you not? Although sufficiently clever, your little game collapsed, and do you know why? Because, notwithstanding your painstaking efforts, you have not yet learned how to lie intelligently, and your plots are basted with white thread! Yet, if you work hard at your friend Graglia's school, you might achieve some success, but never with me; remember, never with me!"

Paolino, who could no longer endure the subtle torture, tried to expostulate in his own defence, but Monsignore forestalled him before he could open his mouth, and thundered forth in a flash of the genuine old "Villarosa temper": "Silence! Silence, I say! Nothing can extenuate this scurvy breach of trust, this pitiful prevarication! You wished to deceive your earthly master, and, worse still, to prevent him from accomplishing the duty he owes to his and your Divine Master! Fie, fie, unworthy priest, unworthy friend!"

This was more than flesh and blood could stand. Don Paolino rose vehemently to his feet, upsetting the heavy chair, and in a bound threw himself upon his knees, desperately clamoring: "Peccavi! peccavi! Pardon me, father, because



I have sinned!" while big tears rolled down his ugly face. For a second Villarosa looked at his old friend with the same stern expression, then he reached out the fine, aristocratic hand, upon which the great amethyst blazed in its diamond setting, and rested it upon the wiry mop of hair by his side, with a motion, half-blessing and half-caress, and said: "Absolvo te, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen." Then in his customary affectionate manner he added: "That's forgiven and forgotten, Paolino, my son; now run away, get me my violet mantle and your *tricorno*, for I hear the carriage at the front steps, and there's not a minute to lose if we are to be on time."

Paolino, still tearful and very much extinguished, obeyed with an alacrity which testified in favor of his repentance, so that in a trice they drove away at an unusually smart trot, an evident proof that Giovanni, smarting under the Bishop's undeserved reproof, was taking it out upon his horses.

The long drive through the lovely hills separating the small lakes of Varesotto from Lake Maggiore only intensified, if possible, the Bishop's resolve to strike a powerful blow for the peasants' cause. By some mysterious agency news spread



from village to village with lightning rapidity, and the astounding dismissal of Graglia, together with a verbatim report of Monsignor Villarosa's words to the Corgeno delegation, had been circulated even faster than usual. This became at once apparent; a couple of miles from Corgeno the road crosses Varano, where the strike originated. The entire population of this large village seemed to have congregated in the one street, so that the Bishop's landau had to pass at a walk through two lines of men and women, three or four deep, who vociferously cheered Monsignore. With a smiling face, feeling elated and triumphant, Villarosa blessed repeatedly the crowd, right and left, whispering to Paolino in the meanwhile: "See now their gratitude for nothing, and dare speak again of them as you did!" This same enthusiastic reception was awaiting them in every one of the villages through which they passed, and Don Paolino saw very plainly that anything he could say would be disregarded and laughed to scorn, and considered by Monsignore as an act of treason, so he was silent most of the way, confining himself, when addressed, to the utterest commonplace.

But as they came nearer to Taino no such reception was at hand. In Taino itself silence



reigned, and only a few frightened stragglers were seen, who scuttled away like rabbits at the sight of a carriage. The stately old Castle of the Longhi family stands on a bold cliff jutting out on Lake Maggiore, half a mile beyond the village, and is surrounded by a large park, enclosed by very high walls. At the principal gate, by the lodge, four *carabinieri*, in marching kit, stood conferring with an oldish man in plain clothes, obviously a detective in mufti. The gate was closed, so the landau had to stop while the lodgekeeper came to reconnoitre; the sight of Monsignore, sitting bolt upright in the carriage, must have been a shock to the fellow, who evidently had received minute instructions, but none, of course, concerning his Excellency the Bishop of the diocese. So, with the deepest of bows and cap in hand, he threw open the massive gates, and as the carriage drove on the lodgekeeper pensively scratched his head and then touched an electric button three times, this being the preconcerted signal for any important personage not included in the list given to him.

In the sumptuous library of the Castle about thirty men were assembled, some sitting round the huge central table, some lounging in luxurious arm-chairs, and others, again, standing in small



groups by the broad windows opening on the large terrace, the Castle's main entrance. Nearly all were smoking, and the Marchese Longhi was kept extremely busy entertaining his many guests. A small, wiry, catlike man, well into the fifties, followed him, almost step by step, as if in fear that he would try to escape; he had a very dark skin and beady-black eyes, which contrasted most strikingly with the blonde hair, giant stature, and ruddy, open countenance of his host.

This small man was Conte Cesare Meravigli, one of the wealthiest and most influential men of the province, and highly favored by the so-called "Liberal" Ministry, then at the head of the Government of Italy, notwithstanding his irreducible and uncompromising black Clericalism. He was said to be the unofficial representative of the Vatican in Lombardy and, undoubtedly, the head of the Zelanti. Of course, he was the prime mover of the present meeting, and from the very inception of the peasants' agitation had openly declared that he favored the most merciless policy of repression, violently denouncing the position taken by the younger clergy, headed by Don Davide Capelletti, and, more than anything else, the attitude of Monsignor Villarosa. Between the Bishop and himself there was, notoriously,



and never had been, any love lost; but Villarosa did not know how to hate, and the candor of his guileless soul precluded the devious tactics in which Meravigli was a past master, so that in the event of an open warfare between the two all the advantages would have been with the latter. However, up to the present moment no active hostilities had taken place between them, and at their unfrequent meetings the layman treated the Bishop with a deference and consideration so exaggeratedly profound as to appear almost fulsome.

“Can’t you stop their useless chatter, Longhi, and have our business over?” Meravigli asked for the twentieth time at least in that grating voice of his which had won for him the deserved nickname of “Vinegar.” “I must drive back as fast as I can to Varese and see that the Sotto-Prefetto keeps his word and sends troops to Castiglione——”

Just at that instant a loud gong sounded three times in rapid succession, and both men started in surprise. “What the devil can that be?” Longhi exclaimed. “Gigi has the severest orders, those, in fact, you gave, and three bells can only mean that either one of our deputies or the Prefect of Milan himself has run down to be present!”



“Not they, man, not they! They all fear compromising themselves too much in these moments!” Meravigli exclaimed as he peered out of the open window and caught sight of the approaching landau. He recognised at once the Villarosa liveries, and rapped out an oath not much in keeping with his sanctimonious habits: “That damned cur Graglia must have turned traitor!”

As to Marchese Longhi, he had been “knocked silly,” as he confessed later; but the jolly good fellow liked and respected the “old gentleman,” and had feebly tried to prevent the trick of sending the invitation to the *fattore* instead of the master, so he rushed out to meet the unexpected guest, not without an anxious misgiving about what was going to happen. He arrived just in time to open the carriage door himself and help Monsignore out; even the obtuse and dull-witted sportsman, who had not the ghost of a thought beyond his stud and his kennel, was struck by the majestic appearance of the Bishop. At that moment he was truly the aristocrat of aristocrats, unmistakably the *grand-seigneur* by right of birth and by right of position, while his silvery curls, escaping from under the violet *mozzetta* as he courteously removed his *tricorno*, aureoled his handsome face and invested it with a supreme dignity.



The first act of Monsignore was typical in the extreme. He held out his right hand to his host, keeping it level with his shoulder, so that the great episcopal ring was presented in a manner that could not be denied. Longhi, awed and subdued, bent one knee almost to the ground, and humbly kissed the ring. Then, victoriously, Villarosa smiled and familiarly patted the big fellow on the shoulder, for, of course, he had known him, as well as the rest of the men assembled there, from their babyhood, saying: "Rather surprised to see me, Carluccio, my son? You see, I had to be in Corgeno myself, and having found there the invitation to this meeting, I came in the place of Graglia, who had been summoned, but could not come, as I happened to dismiss him from my service and pension him off last evening!"

These words were uttered in the clearest tones of Monsignore's far-carrying voice, and purposely so, for he had caught sight of Meravigli and the rest of them crowding the broad entrance of the library. With stately step and haughty mien he walked in, followed by Longhi and by Don Paolino, who, poor fellow! shuffled along more awkwardly than ever. All the men present, with Meravigli at their head, bowed deeply, and Villa-



rosa responded by a brief inclination of his head; then for a moment there was a tense, breathless silence. Meravigli interrupted it. "If your Excellency pleases, I will call this meeting to order!" Then without awaiting a reply, he raised his hand, and, as by a preconcerted arrangement, the men sat around the table, leaving the one arm-chair, prepared for the president, free. To this Longhi ceremoniously escorted the Bishop, so that he found himself placed between Meravigli and his host. Then, without more ado, the latter drew some written sheets from his pocket and rapidly read out what purported to be an *exposé* of the agrarian situation. The venom, the fury, and, at the same time, the ill-concealed terror of the writer were evident in every line; the few considerations which might have appealed to impartial and thoughtful minds were overwhelmed by the foulest imputations, obviously mendacious, heaped upon the peasants, with the clear purpose of frightening the authorities into wholesale and merciless repression. At the close a set of resolutions were offered, openly invoking this repression, together with a sort of pact binding the signers not to grant any concessions without the approval of the others, and to put in being any new disciplinary regulations which might be



ordered by the committee to be named that day.

Except for not too frequent and far from unanimous murmurs of approbation, the reading came unchallenged to the end. Then Villarosa, who had become as pale as a sheet, with a great vertical vein pulsating in his forehead, rose as if moved by an irresistible force, and in a voice which sounded curiously muffled asked for leave to address the meeting on the report before them, and Meravigli had to bow affirmatively. Impromptu as it was, seldom had a more telling defence of the peasants and of their grievances and aspirations been delivered. To a few of those present it came as a startling revelation, as a disclosure of unrecognised truths which had stared them in the face for years, and which they had allowed to pass by them unnoticed, ignoring the formidable significance of their meaning. To others, the great majority, in whom the habits of landlordism had become so ingrained as to obliterate the faculty of appreciating any other but the traditional standards, it was naught else but arrant nonsense clothed in eloquent words, and the "good Bishop's tirade" was the consequence of his nebulous and unpractical conception of life. To the remaining few men of Meravigli's



stamp it was an insult and an outrage, the shameless proclamation of an apostate and a traitor, who, for the sake of popularity and notoriety, had thrown overboard the allegiance he owed to his class.

But of Meravigli's elaborate report nothing remained; Villarosa's implacable dialectic had torn it to shreds, and its author writhed with impotent rage under the subtle lash of its pungent though refined irony. However, while this fanned overpoweringly the flame of his hatred, it did not blind Meravigli to the fact that the Bishop's eloquence was doomed to be devoid of any results. He knew that not one of the landlords present would refuse to sign the pact on account of the speech just delivered; the bonds holding the landlords together were much too powerful to be broken. So when Villarosa closed his address, kept by him most rigorously within the strict limits of the material interests, there was a sort of awed hush, followed by a low murmur, and Meravigli rose to state that, as no one else had asked to speak, he would declare the report approved, and proceed to the signing of the resolutions and pact.

Quick as thought Villarosa was again on his feet. "I, gentlemen, for one, not only refuse to



approve Conte Meravigli's report as groundless and misleading, not only refuse to sign any pact based on repression and wanton cruelty, but demand that my written and signed protest be appended to the so-called resolutions and pact!" The Bishop took a pen and wrote a few lines, which he read in a voice now thrilling as a clarion-cry: "I, the undersigned, as a Christian, as a Bishop, as a gentleman, solemnly protest against and denounce the utter baselessness, the blind partisanship, and the pitiless cruelty which inspire the resolutions and pact here above set forth, and refuse hereby to sully my name by appending it to the aforesaid." Then, unheeding the clenched fists and blind fury depicted in Meravigli's distorted face, he thundered in a voice which rang again in the vaulted hall: "Deceit heralded this assembly, misrepresentation dictates its decision, blood and hate will be its results! May the consequences fall upon the heads of the guilty, sparing the innocent, and the Almighty have mercy upon us all!" Then, turning to Longhi, whose pallid face told of his intense dismay, he curtly added: "My carriage, Marchese!"

No one moved; the silence was almost tragic in its intensity as Meravigli, incapable of any further restraint, hissed: "True to your past,



Bishop, to your past . . . not forgotten nor forgiven. . . . I swear——”

But Monsignore took no notice of the speaker; with head erect, eyes flashing, his great violet mantle flowing around him, he slowly walked to the terrace with so superb a dignity that nearly all, in spite of themselves, rose and bowed profoundly as he disappeared.

A minute later the carriage was heard to drive away, and then pandemonium broke loose in the library of Taino Castle.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE LETTER MARKED "PRIVATE"

MONSIGNORE'S return to Casbenno by a way which cut off the long detour through Corgeno, was extraordinarily silent and dreary. The broad provincial road had all the unpicturesque devotion to straight lines of Government engineering, and for the most part left the villages, right and left, perched upon hilltops or nestling in sheltered glens, so no more enthusiastic receptions were in store for the Bishop. But, half-way back, the village of La Cascinetta, the parish of Don Felice Ranzi and now the home of the Graglias, had grown from a few houses to a rather important locality on both sides of the road. Evidently some one working in the fields had spied the Villarosa carriage, and had raced home to report the event, so that when Monsignore drove through he was greeted with frantic hurrahs by the entire population, who stopped the carriage while the Bishop rose and solemnly imparted his blessing.



When they started again he turned to Don Paolino, who, ever since they had left Taino, sat hunched up in his corner, the picture of anguished and puzzled collapse, and with a return to that delightful humor which he seemed to have lost for the last forty-eight hours, he said: "Don Felice will be pleased, eh, Paolino? What a pity that our friend Conte Meravigli cannot hear them!" Then as he could not elicit even a grunt from his secretary, he grabbed him by the arm and administered a good-natured little shake. "Wake up, man, and for goodness' sake don't look as if you had fallen from a church steeple on your head! If a little preliminary bout like this puts you in such a dilapidated condition, how will you fulfil the onerous duties of your position during the impending battles?" and the old gentleman laughed heartily at his own ironic conceit.

Don Paolino heaved a huge sigh, portentously shook his head, then throwing up his arms to heaven, as if calling it to witness, he broke forth: "Am I dead or alive? Or have I been dreaming the most frightful nightmare of my whole life? What is going to happen next? Shall I ever forget your Excellency's face, or the sound of your voice, or the gentlemen's looks, or the expression of Vinegar's—I mean Conte Meravigli's—black



eyes? It was terrible . . . terrible. . . . Master, master, what have you done? Made a set of omnipotent enemies, who will ruin you some day in the opinion of—over there." And as usual he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, for him ever the direction of the fearsome Vatican.

Monsignore turned right round in his place, crossed his arms, and looking Don Paolino squarely in the eyes, replied: "Once and for all, my son, remember that when Guido Villarosa has made up his mind as to what is his duty, he is not going to be wheedled or threatened into deviating from it. I am perfectly aware that to-day I have made at least one powerful enemy; I shall probably make many others in the course of this fight. I know that these enemies will do all in their power to ruin me in the opinion of his Holiness, or in that of those for whom I am fighting, or in that of both, but I know still better that they will never prevail. Neither his Holiness nor the peasants will ever listen to the venomous falsehoods whispered in their ears; the Pope is too wise, all-seeing, and noble; the peasants too loyal, devoted, and shrewd. With those two on my side I fear nothing, and am certain of the final victory, which is, let me tell you, the victory of right over wrong! So, my son, cheer up!"



Monsignore had spoken in an even, almost colorless, tone, so conspicuously lacking that innocent histrionism which rendered extremely picturesque all the good Bishop said, and, perhaps because of this, it sank deep into Don Paolino's consciousness. That faithful secretary understood that henceforth it would be impossible for him to protect his beloved master from the rough and cruel handling of the world, but howbeit he vowed in his heart never to relinquish his post and play watch-dog more strenuously than ever. In spite of this new-born conviction, he, however, blurted out:

"A poor priest, a peasant's son, cannot know his Holiness the Pope as your Excellency; but a peasant's son knows the peasants more than your Excellency. The peasants are shrewd enough, and no mistake, but loyal and devoted? Pah! they haven't an ounce of loyalty or devotion in their make-up, and certainly none for a *padrone*, even though he be you, who are going to sacrifice everything in their behalf. At the first occasion see how they will turn back upon you and yell 'Morte a Villarosa!' just as lustily as they howled 'Viva Villarosa!' and this sooner, may be, than we think!"

The Bishop sat back very wearily in his corner,



a wan little smile upon his lips, but did not reply. Perhaps he thought it wasted breath to argue the point with Paolino, perhaps he felt exhausted by the long drive, the strain, and the excitement. Silence reigned, and after a while Monsignore fell into a fitful slumber. Paolino, though watching him narrowly, tenderly awoke him when the carriage slowed up to turn in at the gates of Casbenno, and exclaimed fervently, "Home at last, thank Heaven!"

This homecoming, however, was by no means a cheerful affair, and it appeared as if Don Paolino had been a little too hasty in expressing his gratitude for the boon accorded; Monsignore looked ill and frightfully tired, and Guido's departure had cast a gloom upon the entire household. An informal repast, neither lunch nor dinner, had been prepared, and by dint of nagging the secretary prevailed upon Villarosa to take some nourishment. Immediately after the Bishop insisted upon going to the study, as there must be a two days' mail to be examined.

They found the letters neatly piled upon the great desk, and Don Paolino in his lazy monotone began to drawl out the contents of the first, some long, wearisome, and unimportant document pertaining to the administration of the episcopal



see. The faithful fellow, seeing that Monsignore was giving obvious signs of a disposition to sink into a peaceful slumber, exaggerated the somniferous inflexion of his voice to overcome any dutiful resistance to laziness. But the second letter set Paolino's hopes to naught: Villarosa's publisher informed him that the first proofs of the book would be sent to him the following week, adding that the work had been found of such deep and striking importance that it had been decided to rush its publication as fast as possible. An undercurrent of deep surprise, which escaped the none too subtle Paolino, ran through the letter, and delicately tickled the Bishop's vanity as he knew the writer to be a most competent critic and well known for his strictly rationalistic principles. The secretary, poor fellow, saw only one thing, namely, that this book, which he hated on account of its possible consequences for Monsignore, was to appear in the near future, thus shattering any wild hopes that something might providentially happen to suspend its publication altogether.

The third letter, again a bulky document from some Prevosto, could no longer tempt Monsignore to peaceful slumber. He waved it aside impatiently, directing Paolino to reply to it as needed,



and declared that he must go on with his work of revising the second volume, neglected for two days. As this did not suit at all the secretary's views, he foraged among the remaining mail in hopes that something might be found to divert Monsignore's trend of thought. Amidst the official-looking envelopes a small one, seemingly in a woman's hand, and conspicuously marked "Private," appeared to be the required bait, so Paolino officiously handed it to Villarosa, gravely remarking, "Your Excellency must certainly attend to this one personally . . . a 'private' letter . . . may be important," and with a flourish of his great fist he sat down in expectation.

Monsignore impatiently shrugged his shoulders, but, complying, caught the few lines it contained at a glance. Paolino saw the handsome face turn ghastly pale, then blaze up crimson, while the eyes flashed in an indescribable fury, so that he stood gazing upon him dumbfounded and as paralysed. Villarosa saw the mute interrogation depicted upon his secretary's countenance, and throwing him savagely the offending letter, thundered, "Read it, by God!" so that the peaceful room echoed strangely with the unusual words.

The letter was undated and unsigned, and ran as follows:



"Old Guido was a freebooter and an enemy of the Church in his youth, and so killed his mother: as a Bishop, he of course ignores the pranks of young Guido, the petted angel, with a divorced woman, which scandalise the whole diocese."

Paolino saw that he had diverted the Bishop's thoughts with a vengeance, and could have kicked himself for a thoughtless fool. But the damage was irretrievably done, and now he could but try to mitigate the old gentleman's ire. Paolino could neither understand nor appreciate the stand taken by Villarosa in any questions pertaining to sex morality. In spite of a constant intercourse with a man whose principles were of the purest and most rigid chastity, he was still what his heredity had made him, elemental and rather gross, so that, if by virtue of his peculiar temperament he had been spared, as he frequently remarked, the temptations of the flesh, yet he was quite ready to wink at the shortcomings of this category in priests, to say nothing of laymen. Young Guido's escapade, as he termed it in his heart, was most comprehensible and excusable, and, anyhow, by no means calling for the fury depicted in every lineament of Monsignore's face. So, after reading again the fatal letter, he shrugged



his shoulders most eloquently and exclaimed in a good-natured, cheery tone: "Boys will be boys, Monsignore, until Judgment Day, and women, of course, all go mad after our Guido; he's so good-looking——"

"Be silent!" Villarosa thundered. "You are no judge in the matter! To think that Guido Calvello, my own sister's son, the child I have raised with unremitting care and attention, should bring this dishonor upon me in my old age and so forget his duty as to become a public scandal, and render possible this infamous letter! To come here and, under my very eyes, conduct an intrigue with a shameless female! It is frightful . . . but . . . it may be a lie, a low, cowardly, filthy lie, worthy of the writer of this abominable letter." That thought seemed to afford him a great relief, and he clung to it furiously. "Yes, it is a lie . . . a lie! I must unmask the villains! I'll do it at once . . . here . . . pen . . . paper! I'll wire Guido to come here at once, and then let the fiends beware!"

Without listening to Paolino, who, being world-wise, had concluded that there must be some fire to give out so much smoke, and would have preferred to see Monsignore not quite so impetuous in summoning his nephew, the telegram was dis-



patched in so pressing a form that it was impossible to refuse Guido the short leave required. Thus the young officer could be at Casbenno by dinner-time, or, at the latest, in the evening, as it was then two in the afternoon.

If Paolino that day had hoped for a quiet visit at the Roccolo or for a comfortable snooze, his dreams were blasted. Monsignore talked and fidgeted incessantly, reading and re-reading that awful letter a hundred times, as if that would help him to discover its author. Paolino prudently kept on attempting to modify the views of Monsignore about the gravity of the imputation, and to lead him little by little to the conclusion that, even if there had been a little "flirtation," there was no cause for such a serious excitement. But on this subject Villarosa was intractable. Immediately surmising that the "divorced woman" must be their neighbor of the Villa Meroni, the Bishop without ceasing denounced scathingly the infamous lie of the letter, and, with obvious inconsistency, the presence of so unholy a being in the immediate vicinity of his own home.

The telegram calling Guido to Casbenno thoroughly upset and nonplussed him. What on earth could have happened? It did not convey the idea of an accident or of a sudden illness,



neither that something untoward had occurred with the peasants, and his colonel, with whom he was a prime favorite, urged him to go, anyhow, at once. He managed thus to catch a much earlier train than could be expected, and during the brief journey he uselessly racked his brain for a solution, never dreaming that he was going to be confronted with the weightiest problem as yet of his whole life; so when with his usual impetuosity he rushed into his uncle's study, he was utterly off his guard, notwithstanding the warning gesticulations of Don Paolino, cautiously stationed behind the old gentleman's back.

Villarosa's greeting was markedly short and constrained. After thanking his nephew for the gratifying promptness with which he had obeyed his call, Monsignore's face grew rigid and tense. Without warning of any sort, he read out aloud the anonymous letter, articulating each word with icy distinctness. To poor Guido it came as a bolt from the blue. Utterly annihilated for a second by the public disclosure of his love for Delia in this cowardly and distorted fashion, he could but curse in his heart his silence and the reasons which had apparently justified it, but no thought of prevarication ever touched him, and he did not flinch from the issue. Erect, in the



attitude prescribed by military discipline, he faced squarely his uncle and quietly said: "It is a lie, uncle; I have simply asked Donna Delia Leoni to be my wife."

If Guido had been taken by surprise, it was nothing in comparison to the shock he inflicted upon Monsignore. The old gentleman, even when he reluctantly admitted to himself that there might be some vague truth in the slanderous falsehood, only supposed that there might have been some more or less innocuous love passages between his handsome nephew and this "bold and dangerous female," as he had denounced his neighbor to Don Paolino. To be brought face to face by his own Guido with the appalling possibility of an accursed and sacrilegious union took his breath away, as if he had suddenly witnessed the universe crumbling around him. Completely thrown off his balance, he committed a grievous mistake. His "Villarosa temper" mastered him, and no sooner had his breath and the possibility of speech returned to him than with withering contempt he flashed back: "Your wife? Your wife, sir? That sacred word is the privilege of pure women . . . not to be polluted by any loose female you fancy for the satisfaction of your filthy passions!"



This atrocious insult, so undeservedly hurled upon Delia, whom Guido worshipped with a great, pure, reverent love, nearly crazed the young man. With clenched fists, as pale as death, he took a rapid and threatening step forward; but, with a tremendous effort over himself, he checked the awful explosion of fury ready to burst, irrespective of the person in front of him. Still trembling from the restraint imposed on his feelings, hoarsely he cried, "I would call any other man but you an infamous liar!" and turning upon his heel, he strode towards the door. Monsignore realised at once his fatal mistake. The sight of the boy's unhesitating departure filled his heart with something akin to despair, and pride and love waged a fierce battle in the old prelate's heart.

Then Don Paolino interfered; he hurled himself blindly between Guido and the door, the coarse features of his ugly face working convulsively as in a fit, and sobbed out rather than said: "For the love of God and the Virgin, stop, Guido! Stop . . . you will . . . you must listen to me! Don't rush off insanely and kill us all because of your mad rage! Stop . . . stop!" And as the young officer was about to push unceremoniously past him, Paolino turned to Monsignore in a wild



flurry of helpless desperation, vociferating, "Stop that crazy boy at all costs!"

But the Bishop seemed turned to stone. Pale, stern, and defiant, he stood by the writing-desk in the same attitude as before. The only visible effect of this terrible scene was the uncontrollable tremor of his hands, which grasped tenaciously the edge of the table till the knuckles gleamed white; when this unfortunate pitch of his hereditary temper was reached, he would have gladly died rather than withdraw what he had said. Not a word, not a sign came to relieve that horrid tension; for Guido, in the matter of temperament, was the counterpart of his uncle, so for a moment their glances clinched and crossed as the flashing swords of two duellists; then the young officer elbowed past Don Paolino, as if the worthy priest had been an inconvenient piece of furniture, and stalked out of the room. The good secretary then found his presence of mind, or rather he imagined so. He rushed full speed after Guido, catching him just as he locked himself in his room to pack all that belonged to him before leaving for ever the home of the man who had outrageously insulted all he loved and revered upon earth.

With Don Paolino, however, Guido did not



restrain himself any longer; his pent-up wrath vented itself in a perfect hurricane of invective, so that the self-appointed peacemaker could not utter one word of the speech he had hurriedly prepared. And, what was still more distracting, even through the fierce flow of the young man's denunciations many basic principles stood out boldly, which gave a tremendous jolt to all the time-worn dogmatic standards which the good priest had mechanically made his own from sheer force of habit and invincible reluctance to exercise his independent power of ratiocination. But, however deeply he was shocked, his native shrewdness saved him from committing the egregious mistake of showing his horrified amazement; in his heart Paolino believed that all Guido's intensity of feeling was due exclusively to thwarted physical passion, this being for his elemental nature a very comprehensible and natural phenomenon, so he simply endeavored to soothe "his boy," almost as if he had yet been a little lad, with sympathising words and pats and meaningless affirmatives and negations. He so far succeeded in his efforts that Guido's flaming anger subsided at least in its outward demonstrations; but poor Don Paolino was far from suspecting that notwithstanding, or rather because, he



had reacquired control over himself, the young officer's resolution of carrying out his plans, regardless of all obstacles, was becoming at every minute more firm and decided.

When, as Don Paolino imagined, one of the two contestants had simmered down to a more malleable frame of mind, he bustled out of Guido's room and ran back to Monsignore's study to exert his powers of persuasion upon the other belligerent. The secretary was fully prepared to utter impassibly the most unlimited white lies, as he did not doubt for a second that if ever the end justified the means, the actual one was just the case. As he re-entered the study, the view which met his eyes was by no means encouraging. Monsignore, huddled in his arm-chair, looked as if he had fallen there when his limbs had suddenly given way under him, but the fierce expression of his face had not softened in the slightest and was as haughty and defiant as before; it looked so inflexible, in fact, that poor Don Paolino quaked in his shoes at the thought of bearding his master; but the conviction that he was working for the happiness of those he loved most on earth gave him unusual courage, and intrepidly he remonstrated with him for his undue severity to "that poor boy."



Don Paolino expected a tremendous flare-up: none came, Monsignore not seeming even to be aware of his presence. This peculiar form of stupor was a very disquieting symptom to Don Paolino, who knew to perfection the frailness of Monsignore's constitution, so, altering his tone to one of confidential earnestness, he launched into a highly colored description of the penitent frame of mind in which Guido had subsided, and urged his master to send him as a messenger of peace and goodwill, thus settling without delay this foolish and deplorable "misunderstanding."

At this Villarosa smiled in bitter contempt. "Let Guido come to me and unequivocally confess that he was crazy and never meant a word he said, and I might overlook the rest!" Monsignore declared with a voice as cutting and icy as a frozen blade, and the poor peacemaker had to be content with this very unsatisfactory result.

Don Paolino trotted back to the young officer's apartment, but, of course, did not repeat one word of the message. With a mighty effort of his imagination he depicted the Bishop's softened feelings and the meeker decisions to which he was arriving, thanks to the weighty remonstrances which he, Don Paolino, had not feared to present. But when he warily hinted that it would be wise



and proper for Guido to hold forth the olive-branch and personally offer the expression of his apology and regret, he was met with as frigid and trenchant a rejoinder as that of Villarosa himself.

"If my uncle is willing to retract the abominable and unwarranted insults he uttered against the lady who will be my wife," Guido haughtily declared, "I will apologise for the words which might have escaped me in my just resentment; otherwise, as soon as I have finished my packing, I leave this house for ever." And in spite of all poor Don Paolino said, he would not budge an inch from that decision.

For the next hour unhappy Paolino ran breathlessly and uselessly from the Bishop's study to Guido's rooms and back again, pleading, urging, advising, and accumulating the most bewildering lies with an extraordinary fertility of invention, but, in spite of all, the breach could not be healed and seemed to grow wider at each visit. Both uncle and nephew, each from his own personal point of view, were right, and, what was a difficulty still more insurmountable, right in their fundamental conceptions of life. Although educated under strictly Roman Catholic principles and prejudices, yet the young lieutenant, with his open mind, had readily absorbed those broad



modern ideas now permeating all countries and classes, and, while he had never bothered much about their practical application to everyday life, it was only human that he should instantly adapt them to his own case, when his personal happiness hung in the balance. Monsignor Villarosa, on his side, while of a brilliancy of mind greatly superior to that of his nephew, had persistently kept aloof from these new ideas, partly because the manner of his life hedged him from any participation in the *Zeitgeist* of the twentieth century, and partly because, having bound himself impulsively and unadvisedly in the fetters of his artificial vocation, he was possessed by an instinctive and almost morbid fear of being suddenly confronted with ideas which he might have enthusiastically espoused, but which, his intuition told him, must be in open and even violent opposition to the secular tenets of that same Church of which he was a minister.

So the final catastrophe could not be delayed any longer. When, for the tenth time at least, Don Paolino returned to the study, he found Monsignore standing by the window, paler, sterner, and more haggard than before. The words which, as a last forlorn hope, the good secretary was about to utter died upon his lips as the Bishop,



with a nervous force almost unthinkable in so frail a body, gripped his wrist and dragged him bodily to the window, whispering in a low, agonised murmur: "Look! look! he is gone!" while with a tremulous finger he pointed to the avenue.

There was Guido rapidly striding away, head erect, a stony expression of defiance on his handsome young face, and the two priests saw him, without a second's hesitation or a backward glance, pass, as they thought, through the gate and out of their sight for ever.

Then at last Monsignor Villarosa broke completely down; he staggered back to his arm-chair, and falling into it, hid his face between his arms outstretched before him upon the desk, while his whole body shook with convulsive sobs. Don Paolino, wild with despair, threw himself on his knees by his side, and almost as tenderly as a woman endeavored to calm and console his master, but for a long while his most patient efforts seemed vain. At last, however, the cruel paroxysm of grief apparently subsided, and Monsignore was able to control himself. Lifting his head, after an unsuccessful attempt or two he managed to speak. "It is . . . all over . . . now! Yes . . . I am strong again . . . leave me . . . Paolino. I . . . I must be alone . . . I wish



it!" And as the secretary demurred and seemed inclined to disobey this order, Villarosa insisted still more firmly: "Yes! . . . you must obey! I appreciate . . . I know that you mean to do right, but this time you must obey me . . . at once! Now . . . go!" So, having no other choice, Don Paolino reluctantly arose and slowly left the room, growling between his teeth that, cost what may, he would some day find the authors of that accursed letter and make them bitterly rue their infamy.

Guido, as he left his uncle's home, was suffering perhaps quite as intensely as Monsignore, with the great difference, however, that he was not a little sustained and consoled by his deep love. It had grown, unwittingly perhaps, a thousand-fold stronger, if possible, by virtue of the violent opposition he had encountered and of the atrocious and unwarranted insults which his uncle, of all men, had heaped upon his Delia's head. He was carried away by a violent wave of resentment against Monsignore, and this overpowering passion seemed to cancel absolutely from his heart all his reverence, and the profound gratitude and love which he had always nourished for him. This was what hurt the most, and if his state of mind had allowed him to examine his innermost



consciousness, he would have been surprised to find deep down that those same feelings formed almost an integral part of his personality.

Without hesitating he turned into the gateway of the Villa Meroni and through the fast falling dusk he walked rapidly up the avenue leading to the house. Simoun, dozing upon the front steps, scented him at once and rushed to meet him, barking delightedly.

These unexpected sounds reached at once Delia's ears, and she guessed immediately that no other than Guido was coming to her. As, by a common, unspoken accord, he had never yet come to her house, her heart told her instantly that something exceptionally grave had happened, for Guido would not have otherwise returned only twenty-four hours after leaving Casbenno for the season. From her boudoir, on the ground floor, she stepped out into the garden and came forward to meet him. The sight of his pale and determined face, the flame of overpowering rage and grief blazing in his habitually laughing eyes, only substantiated her worst fears. "What has happened?" she asked in her calm, collected voice, which was one of the most striking traits of her strong and well-poised nature.

Then Guido found himself confronted by a tre-



mendous task. How could he repeat to her the infamous slanders which had been flung to his face? How could he confess that it was his own uncle who had not only endorsed them, but had added insult to injury by branding their contemplated marriage as a blasphemous travesty? How could he admit that their purest and most cherished ideal had been scoffed at and denounced in shameless vituperation?

Once more his inborn straightforwardness pointed the right way out to him. He bent low his head to kiss Delia's hand with even a greater reverence than ever before, as if to signalise his attitude and contrast it with that which the world might be taking; then in brief, scathing terms he related to her all that had taken place, not omitting a single particular and not sparing himself the bitterest reproaches for his culpable procrastination when by speaking boldly he might have forestalled the disastrous effect of the fatal anonymous letter. And he finished by declaring that he had severed every tie which bound him to Monsignor Villarosa, whose unpardonable conduct had cancelled all the gratitude and affection which he, Guido, otherwise owed him.

Delia listened to his story with the deepest attention, but not a twitch of pain nor a flash of



indignation marred the sweet dignity of her lovely face, though in her heart there must have throbbed with renewed intensity the dull agony of her past. When Guido closed his story a wan little smile crept round her strong mouth, and in her proud, hawk-like eyes, then in her usual composed manner she spoke:

“My poor, poor boy. . . . Did I not warn you from the very first day of what was bound to happen? Did I not tell you that it was just this estrangement between your uncle and yourself that I feared? Did I not endeavor to point out what madness it was for you to imagine that all would run on smoothly and easily? Now that the blow has fallen, it would be useless and cruel to torment you with ‘I-told-you-so’s’! The blow is much more terrible for you than for me, as I was prepared for it and you were not. Be, then, wise while still in time. Abandon at once all hope of altering your uncle’s opinion. Renounce me . . . and I will leave Varese and even Italy, neither blaming you nor thinking less of you.”

Guido’s face became tragic to behold. “Renounce you?” he questioned in a low, passionate voice. “I fail to understand you, Delia . . . do you mean to say that you do no longer care for me because of what has happened? Do you



refuse to be mine because of my uncle's conduct?" All anger had disappeared from his eyes, where now only a mortal dismay could be seen.

More than any impassioned confirmation of his love, this absolute lack of comprehension of her words, almost as if they had been uttered in a language unknown to him, impressed Delia with the magnitude of her lover's devotion. The idea that he was at liberty to break his troth could not penetrate into Guido's mind, and this discovery brought a wonderful balm to her aching heart. Her face grew inexpressibly tender, in her proud eyes there suddenly came a softness such as Guido had never beheld there before, a softness which irradiated her face, making it even more surpassingly lovely. She came nearer to him and with both her hands on his shoulders, tiptoed to kiss him delicately on the brow, almost as if blessing him for his consoling love. He caught her in his arms, strained her passionately to his breast, and for a while at least the whole world and the momentous problems confronting them were cancelled and forgotten.

But they were compelled to return to earth very soon, and, entering the house, they discussed the whole situation with greater calm. Happily all the clouds that might have arisen between them



had been dispelled for ever, but the problems involved in their case remained, and had to be solved. On one point especially Delia set a great stress; Guido must never forget, whatever might happen, the immense debt of gratitude he owed to Monsignore; and as the young man obstinately maintained that the outrage cast upon his fiancée by his uncle cancelled every memory of the past, she sternly reminded him that nothing could ever do that, and that gratitude was by no means a virtue, but the fulfilment of a duty to be held sacred at all costs by a true heart.

After much discussion it was decided that Guido must return immediately to his regiment, and from Milan write to his father announcing his engagement; as to the marriage, Delia absolutely refused to fix a date, however remote, in spite of Guido's insistent plea that it was the only fitting rejoinder to the infamous slanders which were circulating. She declared that such a solution was contrary to their higher feelings, and that, at all costs, Guido must ever consider himself bound to respect the convictions of his uncle, groundless as they might have been, and only act in absolute opposition to them when all endeavors to persuade him of their lack of substance had failed. To this end, Guido must take his



time, and when he had completely reacquired his equanimity write to Monsignore at great length, beginning by the expression of his grief for the words he had uttered under the sway of a great and justified resentment, and then proceeding to maintain patiently and respectfully his intentions. In justice to Delia and to himself, he must urge Monsignore not to allow prejudice and calumny to obscure his mind, and beg him personally to examine the facts of the case, the history of Delia's marriage and divorce, as, no doubt, such a research would not perhaps alter his dogmatic views, but might at least radically modify his opposition to the marriage, rendering it possible for him to regard it at least without hostility.

When this understanding had been reached, Guido left Delia after a long and tender leave-taking and set out on foot for Varese to catch the first available train back to Milan. Passing by his uncle's home, which seemed engulfed in mournful darkness with the exception of a single light twinkling in the Bishop's study, the young man was forced to acknowledge to himself that Delia was right about his real feelings towards his uncle, and, half-ashamed at what he yet considered a puerile weakness, he gently waved his hand in tender salutation to the silent old house.



## CHAPTER VII

### TWO VIEWS CONCERNING MARRIAGE

MONSIGNOR VILLAROSA'S unexpected estrangement from his nephew by no means affected his participation in the agrarian struggle; it rather intensified his activity, as if he wished to seek forgetfulness in mental and physical exhaustion. The Bishop's dismissal of Graglia and his solemn protest at the meeting of Taino were widely discussed; it now became imperative to set an example of how the estate should be managed upon a radically new basis, and Monsignore set to work to evolve the solution of this problem. He conceived this readjustment of the relations between landlord and tenants not so much as a settlement of his own private affairs, but as an opportunity to present a practical example for that great majority of landowners who would be only too anxious, according to his own optimistic views, to follow his example. Villarosa was evidently hypnotised by his chivalrous dream of righting the



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injustice of centuries with one stroke of his pen, and as he considered his mission as entrusted to him by a special order from Heaven, he was impervious to all worldly considerations.

To this end he had almost daily consultations with Centeu, who never failed to work upon Monsignore's good heart in the matter of concessions to the peasants, and, of course, with Don Davide Capelletti, now the recognised head of the new party. This young Curato, who, much to the displeasure of jealous and suspicious Don Paolino, had become almost intimate with Villarosa, being neither hampered by too many scruples of conscience nor ruled by high-toned principles, very soon concluded that by continual flattery Monsignore might be induced to act as he wished. This was perhaps true, but only to a certain point. Villarosa's vanity could be worked upon only by the most delicate and unobtrusive adulation, as anything approaching fulsomeness grated upon his sensitive nature, and once his suspicion was aroused, he soon discovered the motive behind the flattery, which was sufficient to upset the best-laid schemes. More than once Don Davide blundered, and this, together with the Curato's clumsy attempts at undue familiarity, although attributed by Monsignore to lack of breeding,



froze up his aristocratic reserve, and precluded further steps in the growing intimacy.

In these conditions the brilliant but unpractical mind of Monsignore evolved what he fondly believed to be the one perfect and harmonious solution of the problem; it embodied all measures, not only for the economic welfare of the peasantry, but also for the uplift of their intellectual and moral conditions. His enthusiasm was so ardent and his forgetfulness of self so complete that he had stripped the landlord almost of all his rights and privileges, and thus left him defenceless at the mercy of the tenants. This was a serious blunder in the interests of the peasants themselves, but he committed the still graver one of attributing to them mental qualities and possibilities rendered utterly inconceivable by centuries of ignorance and oppression.

The final draft of the project once completed, Monsignore, always over-scrupulous, decided that it must be examined and passed by some one, not a landlord, in full sympathy with the peasants' aspirations. He consulted Dr. Sandri, and this clever but most utopian of mortals vociferously endorsed the Bishop's project, to the undisguised fury of Don Paolino, and declared that he had just the man for the job, so that the following



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day the precious document was entrusted by the doctor personally to the hands of Avvocato Guidobaldi. This lawyer, a university chum of the doctor's, was a very clever but extremely ambitious man, whose one aim was to represent Varese in the Italian Parliament. Guidobaldi instantly saw what advantage it would be for him to link his name to that scheme; he was aware that, being a declared Socialist, the Conservative landlords would oppose him anyhow, while to be at one with Monsignor Villarosa insured him the full force of the Peasants' League and the influence of the clergy. He accordingly closed his eyes to the many weak points of the Bishop's creation, and wrote him an enthusiastic letter, thanking him for the privilege and honor of co-operating with one who would be celebrated in all time as one of the benefactors of humanity. His minute and critical examination of the project had failed to discover the necessity of any substantial alterations, and he suggested only a few modifications of form upon legal grounds.

Villarosa was elated by Guidobaldi's letter, and Don Paolino, overwhelmed by this violent disruption of the old order of things, was cruel enough to exclaim: "What will our Guido say when he hears of this precious piece of work?" Mon-



signore winced visibly at the thrust, but sternly replied: "Conte Guido Calvello has no say whatever in the management of the Villarosa property; if he had, he would certainly approve of all I have done!" But gloom settled once more upon the Bishop's face, and never left it till the time came for the publication in Corgeno of its new organisation. On the day fixed, Monsignore, Don Paolino, and Dr. Sandri drove there from Casbenno, and were received by Avvocato Guidobaldi, the family solicitor Dr. Ceretti, and the Corgeno committee of the League, with Centeu at its head. In the main drawing-room of the old house the proceedings began in the presence of all the titular tenants; Guidobaldi read aloud the new "Pact of Tenantry," as it was called, and explained it carefully, section by section. Monsignore joyfully saw how readily all understood its clauses, but received a very painful shock when they reached the chapter setting forth the close solidarity required from the members of the new association by which Corgeno would be farmed for a long lease. In the formula, "One for all, all for One," they seemed to scent danger, because they could not understand it, and Centeu, at the end of the section, unwilling to reveal his limitations, airily commented: "Yes, of course, it means . . . that



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we must all think for ourselves." Monsignore alone found no heart to smile; the others laughed outright, Don Paolino more uproariously than the others, and he cried out, "Centeu, thou block-head, no danger that thou thinkest of others than thyself!" Monsignore silenced Paolino, but every one felt that the inherent weakness of the scheme had been demonstrated.

After the pact was read they adjourned for lunch. It turned out to be a most lively and contentious affair. Dr. Sandri and Guidobaldi, insisting that, in the prevailing conditions which had lasted for centuries, the peasants could never have become altruistic, extolled the ready grasp of their intelligence; Don Paolino ruthlessly exposed their native meanness, their incredible ignorance, and boundless selfishness; and Dr. Ceretti, a frenzied Conservative, who as the family solicitor was entrusted with the important ministerial function of drawing up the new lease, was almost tragic in his forebodings as to the consequences of Monsignore's "folly," and considered what was going on at Corgeno not much less than a blasphemous desecration of the holy laws which form the very palladium of society.

After lunch the general meeting of the tenants was convened under the presidency of Guidobaldi;



it turned out to be a huge success, being most orderly and harmonious. The signing of the pact took a long time, as it was a laborious operation, involving much expenditure of energy and ink, especially for those who could not write. The new organisation, to be named "The Villarosa Tenants' Agricultural Association," was formally constituted, and its officers duly balloted for and elected; Centeu was president, and the Board was made up of the leading lights of the Peasants' League. The long day's work was finally closed by the reading of the new lease, a ceremony performed by Ceretti in deep, lugubrious tones, interspersed here and there, at the most obnoxious points, by his audible groans, which invariably called forth sarcastic allusions to his morbid conservatism from Guidobaldi's ready wit. Then came the crowning and most important event of the ceremony, the signing of the lease. Centeu signed for the association, then it was Monsignore's turn.

Villarosa stood up, his delicate cheeks pink with gratified pride, a great light in his eyes, and in the expectant hush he turned to those around him, saying with deep earnestness: "May the Almighty bless and prosper all of you who have helped me in my work, and may He endow the new associa-



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tion with His wisdom and strength. I can now exclaim, as Simeon, 'Nunc Dimittis, Domine, servum tuum!' for my work heredown is nearly ended." Then, taking a new pen, he signed his full name and titles. An awed and solemn silence came over the men there assembled; they all obscurely felt the presence of something infinitely higher and purer than their petty ambitions, and saw that whatever might be the fate in store for Villarosa's creation, it was the germ of a new world.

Guidobaldi broke this silence by claiming as his fee the pen with which Monsignore had signed the lease: it was destined to become a priceless relic and pass into history. This delicate flattery touched Monsignore in his tenderest spot, and, though affecting to take it in lighter vein, he handed it himself to the astute lawyer.

The company then broke up, and Monsignore drove back to Casbenno with Sandri and Don Paolino. In the soft October gloaming they passed through the main street of the village, and its whole population, men, women, and children, lined it in a dense mass, seemingly crazed by enthusiasm. The men cheered madly; the women and children hustled and fought each other to scramble up and kiss Monsignore's hands or even



the hem of his mantle, so that the coachman had the greatest difficulty to prevent accidents from happening. Even when the horses could finally trot, the crowd managed to keep up with them, but running and cheering at the same time soon exhausted the most indefatigable, and the trio in the carriage were able to discuss the events of the day.

Monsignor Villarosa's innocent vanity must have been tremendously gratified when the "Pact of Corgeno," as it was afterwards called, was divulged. Guidobaldi used it, of course, to its fullest extent for his own personal ambition, and Don Davide Capelletti was quite as anxious to inform the world at large of the victory of the new party. Prina issued a special number of the *Corriere Cattolico* with the pact *in extenso*, accompanied by a leader in which Bishop Villarosa was raised to the stars. The Socialist papers of Lombardy took up the subject, and very soon it was known and discussed throughout Italy. Then the reviews published special articles about it from economic and political standpoints; on the whole, the critics rendered justice to Villarosa's brilliant conception and philanthropic spirit, but took it most severely to task from a practical point of view. From the camp of the landlords



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and associated interests, all-powerful in Lombardy, there came a mighty howl of denunciation and obloquy; they decried the Bishop of Varese as a vulgar demagogue, a shameless apostate who was undermining the pillars of Church and State and who ought to be forcibly restrained from doing any further harm. The more charitable declared Monsignor Villarosa insane, and asked that he should be treated as such.

Don Paolino lived in a state of perennial ebullition arising from the perusal of numberless newspaper clippings, either glorifying the abhorred pact or virulently attacking his idol, Monsignore. This, added to the steady stream of letters from all sorts of people, many anonymous, containing threats, praise, insults, and advice, which began to pour down steadily upon his master, drove Don Paolino within an ace of losing his head. Villarosa on the other hand, seemed to thrive in this peculiar atmosphere of polemics; he had evidently dismissed from his mind the estrangement from Guido and its causes. At any rate, he never mentioned "the boy" and Don Paolino feared to touch this topic, as he knew not what to think of this silence.

One day, however, two letters came which violently upset this apparent calm. Don Paolino



was, as usual, reading aloud to Monsignore the morning's mail, when Guido's familiar handwriting caught his eye upon a bulky envelope; the good priest picked it delicately out, and with a premonitory clearing of his throat, remarked to Monsignore, "This letter—ahem!—needs, I think, your Excellency's very personal attention," and he held out the big letter. Monsignore started violently as he saw the writing, but snatching it without a word, placed it between the leaves of a book at his elbow, and as Don Paolino did not seem inclined to proceed with the morning's work, curtly advised him to continue. But the obstinate secretary displayed as usual his dilatory tactics, and the Bishop angrily took up at random a letter within his reach, violently tore it open, and began reading it himself.

This time, however, Monsignore got more than he had bargained for, the missive turning out to be from Conte Calvello, his brother-in-law. It was not long, but very much to the point: he advised Villarosa that Guido had written, announcing his engagement and forthcoming marriage, and asking for his approbation. Calvello, of course, considered this merely as an act of proper deference, because, as he stated, he had long since ceded to Monsignore his parental



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authority, and furthermore Guido needed no authorisation from any one, being fully of age, and financially more than independent. But he could not help feeling rather puzzled at Guido's unusual reticence about the person, family, and surroundings of his fiancée, of whom he barely mentioned the name. Calvello took for granted that Villarosa was thoroughly informed about all the particulars of the proposed match, and asked that his brother-in-law should let him know what he thought about it, hoping that there was nothing undesirable or detrimental in the proposed union.

Before Don Paolino could fully realise where he was and what had happened, he found himself unceremoniously bundled out of the study, and informed that his services would not be needed for the day; he had, however, managed to recognise Conte Calvello's writing on the torn envelope, so his chagrin at being debarred from hearing the news, and, maybe, upholding Guido's cause, was unbounded. But there was no resisting that forcible ejection; Paolino withdrew to his fastness of the Roccolo, grumbling so audibly and ostentatiously as he went that Monsignore could not help smiling, though, Heaven knew, he had not felt as much distressed and hesitating for many years. When Don Paolino's groans had died



gradually away, this smile was replaced by a heavy frown, more of sadness and of concentration than real anger. He resumed his seat, and, taking a desperate resolution, caught up Guido's unopened letter, but his nerveless fingers seemed to fail him, and for a while he could only stare helplessly at the address. With a mighty effort of will he overcame his weakness, and purposely schooling himself to be methodical, carefully cut the envelope and unfolded the voluminous epistle.

For over three hours he read and re-read it; intensely prejudiced against divorce, for him a mortal sin and an unspeakable shame, he could not, however, refrain from wondering how it was that a subtle transformation had wonderfully improved Guido's mentality; the letter had been obviously written without any extraneous suggestion, but the somewhat puerile crudity of the young officer's thoughts and expressions had ripened into the straightforward simplicity of the virile man, whose mind, cleared of all uncertainties, unerringly strives to reach its goal. The story of Delia's marriage and divorce, as it was told, brought with it to Monsignore such a powerful though recondite leaven of thought, such a revelation of psychical problems of which he must honestly confess an utter ignorance, that for a



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while all the cherished beliefs of a lifetime seemed ready to crumble into dust. But these beliefs, which his Church has so patiently and cunningly interwoven with its fundamental dogmas and identified with them, die exceedingly hard, even in a mind as alert and receptive as that of Villars. He braced himself to resist this curious feeling creeping over him, and attributed it to the temptation of Satan. The devil is very much alive, especially for theologians, and serves as an extraordinarily valid excuse for that mental inertness which entices human beings to shun rather than solve vital problems of conscience.

Monsignore then realised that "this woman" was much more formidable than he had imagined at first; instinctively he divined that the miraculous transformation of his nephew's mentality was exclusively due to her influence, and that the struggle to save Guido from what he considered everlasting perdition must be terribly hard and uncertain. At the same time, subconsciously, a peculiar, undefined current was drawing him towards her, a current in which curiosity, sympathy, and the irresistible appeal of the *Ewig-Weibliches* were curiously blended. As a consequence of this he came to the conclusion that one only line of action was opened to him: this Delia Leoni must



be, he felt sure of it, a woman of great intelligence; he must therefore appeal to her directly, demonstrate conclusively the impossibility of her union with Guido, and finally persuade, frighten, or wheedle her into dismissing her lover. As to the inherent difficulties of the task, Monsignore made light of them; he forgot that he knew absolutely nothing about women, and that even a silly girl, just out of boarding-school, would have twisted him round her little finger. Monsignore trusted blindly in what he thought unanswerable arguments, and not a little, it must be confessed, in his own personal magnetism and in the weight of his imposing personality.

As soon as this purpose crystallised in his mind Monsignore could sit no longer; he rose and nervously paced to and fro in his study, discussing with himself how it must be done. No, he would not write to her; he must pounce upon the "enemy" unawares, not allowing her time to prepare for the encounter or refuse peremptorily his request for an interview. The sooner the attack took place the better, and with his usual impulsiveness he suddenly made up his mind that no moment was better than the present. A youthful flush mantled his delicate cheeks, and more vividly than ever there sparkled in his eyes that bright-



ness which had never been completely obliterated either by age or by care; with the alacrity of a young man he passed into his bedroom, glanced for a moment in the big looking-glass, and changing his sash to a newer and glossier one, he smoothed his silvery curls under the violet *mozzetta*, and snatching up his *tricorno* and ebony cane, rapidly tripped down his private stair and was out on the avenue, upon his way to the Villa Meroni. His elastic step, the vivacity of his movements, the litheness of his juvenile bearing, all openly revealed that Monsignor Villarosa was on adventure bent, and that the prospect was extraordinarily exhilarating to him.

Don Paolino, from his perch at the Roccolo, caught a glimpse of his Excellency just as he was entering the enemy's camp, and the sight gave the secretary such a violent shock that he nearly dropped off his narrow seat, at the risk of breaking his neck.

But as the road up to the Villa Meroni became more and more steep, Monsignore unconsciously had to moderate his ardor and walk slower, with the result that he was able to consider how to announce his unexpected visit. That he was behaving in a most unusual and unceremonious manner no one could have been more aware than



himself, but, to his mind, the circumstances were such that they warranted an immediate action, untrammelled by the polite formalities of society. This thought, however, was not of much help to him, and the nearer he came to the house the more uncomfortable and dubious he felt. Fate, as it often does, came apparently to his rescue; the gardener, a Casbenno man whom he well knew, suddenly emerged from behind a clump of bushes, and, not a little startled at the sight of such a visitor, greeted him with a deep obeisance and a respectful inquiry about what he could do to serve his Excellency. "Is the Marchesa di Tavernay at home?" Monsignore queried in his grandest manner. "If she is, please let her know that I am here and must see her at once on important business."

The gardener vanished, while Monsignore walked slowly on towards the main entrance, never dreaming that from an upper window Delia had seen and heard him. The sight of the stately old prelate had been a violent shock and surprise to her; she was totally unprepared for any such visit, but the resolute bravery of her perfectly balanced soul never wavered a minute. She nourished a profound aversion to and distrust of the ministers of that Church from which her for-



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bears had suffered persecution, prison, and even death; she realised that the Bishop's visit signified that she was about to undergo a most painful interview; but as she narrowly scrutinised his delicate features, she could not help noting the striking resemblance between uncle and nephew, and, in spite of herself, she was forced to smile almost tenderly at the quaint sameness of their guileless expressions. So, when her butler, a sturdy old Romagnol who hated "the crows" with a deathless hatred, announced the visit of Bishop Villarosa in a tone which amounted to a proposal of immediate and forcible ejection, she quietly ordered him, to his unbounded surprise and dissatisfaction, to usher his Excellency into the drawing-room, and tell him that she would be with him in a few minutes.

Monsignore, as he stood by a table covered with books and magazines, took in at a glance the intimate and subtle refinement of everything surrounding him; with a sort of remorse, that was almost a pleasurable sensation, he noted a hundred little traits which revealed in this "woman" tastes and habits similar to his own, while the exquisite femininity of the ambient seemed to sap all the sternness of his hostile resolve, and leave him powerless and tongue-tied. Suddenly a door



opened and Delia appeared; for an instant she stood erect on the threshold between the rich draperies which decorated it, then she quietly and gracefully came forward and in an evenly modulated voice courteously asked Monsignore to be seated and state the important business to which she owed the honor of his visit.

Never in his existence had Villarosa found himself in a more embarrassing position, nor at a greater loss for words. The "woman" was so very different from anything he had imagined her to be, quite the opposite of what his prejudiced mind had decided that "an awful limb of Satan, a divorced female" must be like, that, forgetting his manners and his mission, he stood there as bewitched, staring at the well-poised little head, at that broad, thoughtful brow, and, above all, at those proud, fearless, hawk-like eyes. With her unerring woman's intuition, Delia immediately fathomed the Bishop's thoughts and the ghost of a smile hovered around her mouth, softening not a little the severe composure of her face, as she patiently waited for her visitor to speak. At last, with a violent effort, Monsignore wrenched himself from under the overpowering spell, and, regardless of all preliminaries, managed to blurt out:



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"Guido . . . my nephew . . . has told me . . . has written me . . . that he intends to take you as his wife. But this cannot be . . . must not be——" and there he stuck, unable to find another word.

"And why not, your Excellency?" came the calm, unwavering question.

Delia's even, passionless tone goaded Monsignore to fluent speech; he was waxing terribly angry, but if he had only known, angry against himself for his helpless state of panic. "You—you, a married woman, ask me such a question! How can you forget your marriage vows before the Altar . . . and that the Marchese di Tavernay is living? How can you forget that no human agency can break the sacred ties pronounced indissoluble by the Church? Yes, I know, Satan is afield with the lure of the flesh . . . you are young . . . and very beautiful . . . and you tempted Guido!"

Delia's eyes flashed ominously. She rose to her feet. Drawing herself up with imperial dignity, she interrupted irresistibly the Bishop, addressing him by his secular title, to impress upon him that his ecclesiastical position had no weight in her mind: "Signor Conte! You are beside yourself, and forget where you are and with whom you are



talking. Even the cloth you bear is no excuse to insult a woman——”

If ever Monsignore had felt ashamed of his words, it was in this minute. Not only had he committed a rude act, ever unworthy of a gentleman, but he had been guilty of an undoubted injustice; that pure, spiritual face, as transparent as crystal, could not be that of a temptress. He crimsoned to his eyes; with that stately grace which was so natural to him, he bowed deeply, and slowly said: “I crave your pardon, madam. You are right, I am beside myself; but do not forget that I am laboring under a terrible strain, for having brought up Guido from babyhood to reverence and obey the eternal truths of God’s own Church, it is more than I can bear to see him suddenly trample wantonly upon them, because you happened to cross his path! Is it not right and natural that I should recoil in horror before such a sinful desecration of a Holy Sacrament? that I should implore you not to cast upon both your lives the curse, the awful curse in store for those who infringe the law, ‘Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder?’”

“ ‘Those whom the Church hath joined together’ is what you mean, Monsignor Villarosa,” Delia retorted with a mirthless laugh; “for your



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Church arrogates to itself the right of ousting God, and of pronouncing in His stead and often against Him! 'Those whom God hath joined together' no man *can* set asunder, but when the Church steps in, and for the furtherance of its boundless lust for material power makes of a civil contract a Sacrament that, grossly administered by man, cannot be dissolved again by man, then it prostitutes the name of God and makes Him a wretched instrument in their grasp. What do you care whether or not a human being is condemned to lifelong despair, riven to chains of vice and shame, and placed in the fearful dilemma of choosing between the vice that withers the soul and the cruel virtue that casts it out in a loveless solitude? You have treasures of toleration for nameless immoralities as long as your man-made dogmas are respected, but woe to those who stand forth in the unassailable armor of their purity, and demand that they should have their place in the sun, to live and love according to God's own law!"

There was a short silence, then before Monsignore could recover from the tumultuous whirl of all his faculties, Delia held up her hand, and he never could forget the subtle witchery of her beauty as she stood before him dimly outlined in the growing dusk. Then she went on:



"When this is said, I can now assure your Excellency that, if he so wishes, Guido is perfectly free, that I would never for a second keep him to his word. Guido knows this fully well, as I have repeatedly told him. But what of the awful curse that you would be casting upon his life, and still more upon your own, Monsignor Villarosa, for 'putting asunder those whom God hath joined together'?"

She paused again to let her words filter through, as the bewildered old gentleman stood helplessly gazing upon her, then with a deep and novel tenderness in her voice, she continued:

"Guido has a heart of gold, the fearless simplicity of a child, and to you, his uncle, the man who has moulded his heart and mind, and whom he venerates and cherishes, I am proud to confess that I love him . . . love him with all the forces of my soul, of that soul which he has uplifted by his pure, selfless devotion from the bitterness and despair of a ruined life to an undreamed ideal of happiness and peace! If for an instant you could forget your cloth and the blind prejudices of a lifetime which are holding your judgment as in a grasp of iron, if you could allow your vision to range undistorted over the true meaning of life, then, fatally, even were you never willing to



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admit it, you would appreciate the deadly blight with which the Church of man has poisoned and adulterated God's own living truth."

Delia had spoken without once altering her tone, with the clearness of a silver bell in the peaceful silence of the evening hour, and every word had sunk down with a power almost superhuman in Monsignor Villarosa's consciousness and left him stunned and breathless; the priest in him was carried away by a furious anger which would have found vent in a torrent of anathemas as abundantly furnished by the numberless authorities of the Church, but the man and the thinker, that best part of him which neither education nor habit had ever been able to stifle, irresistibly stemmed the current of abuse all but too ready to overflow. Again, that all-conquering love, so unmistakable in Guido's letter and Delia's words, awed and attracted him overpoweringly; for it was, strangely, the first time in his life that he had been brought face to face with it, and the long parched soul of this self-appointed dweller of the desert hailed its appearance as that of a rill of crystal waters wherein to slake his mortal thirst.

Pale as death, with a tremor that shook him as an aspen leaf, Monsignore lifted up his arms as if in a despairing supplication to Heaven. He



looked unseeingly round him, then, a pathetic, almost tragic figure, with bent head and tottering steps, he blindly groped his way to the door. Delia hurriedly stepped forward to lend him assistance, but refrained from doing so as she saw the shudder of agony which shook his frame at her approach. The tender light which had softened her hawk-like eyes shone as vivid and as sweet as before, and now it was intensified by the divine compassion of victorious womanhood. She obscurely felt that she had fought and won a great battle for Guido and for herself, but even more than a paltry personal advantage, it was a victory of light over the powers of darkness, it was the sowing of the seed of truth.

As to Monsignore, he never was able to account how he managed to leave the Villa Meroni; when he recovered the possibility of thinking, he was slowly descending the winding avenue, and from a turning he remembered gazing in admiration on the thin crescent of the new moon just setting behind Monte Rosa. With the capacity for thought he recovered also that of analysing his sensations; what had come over him that a mere wisp of a girl had utterly routed and silenced him? His presence of mind, his eloquence, his dialectic, and, above all, his fulminating powers of denun-



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ciation, how had they disappeared? He could find no answer to the questions he asked of himself, and, mechanically, he stopped short to ponder. In the deepest recesses of his mind a new and marvellous faculty was budding, the wiser and broader comprehension of life, above and beyond the suffocating trammels of dogma and of Church, and nearer to the uncorrupted ideals of his Divine Master. Furiously he attempted to suffocate the inner voice of his new-born conscience, hoping to silence it for ever, and in the wild disorder of his whole being he turned towards the Villa Meroni where now a few lights were twinkling, as if wishing to implore from the God of vengeance a ruthless punishment upon that "woman's" head. But, no! it was useless, he could not, he could not! Then he fled, as if pursued, until he reached the entrance of his own gardens.

But what would Monsignore have thought if he could have read what Delia was writing at that very moment to Guido? "Your uncle has just left. Imagine my feelings when I saw him walk up to the house! I guessed at once that he had received your letter. The scene must have been awful for him, as I did nearly all the talking and told him many hard truths, but, oh, my Guido! he looks so much like you that when I saw him



pale and trembling, almost ready to faint, my heart ached to throw my arms round his neck and draw his head upon my shoulder to comfort him and smooth those lovely silver curls of our (you see, I say *our*) Ziggio."

In the meanwhile, Don Paolino was pacing nervously to and fro in the garden; the dinner hour was long past, and Monsignore, always the personification of punctuality, had not made an appearance, so the good secretary was greatly concerned and anxious about his master, not to mention the fact that he was consumed with curiosity, as he had seen where the Bishop had gone. When Don Paolino suddenly saw Monsignore coming towards him at a rapid gait, he greeted him in his loudest and cheeriest tones:

"Back at last, your Excellency! I was just preparing to come after you, as I feared to leave you any longer alone—alone as Daniel in the den of the wild beasts. But now I exult to see from your expression that you have triumphed over that shameless huzzy——"

Monsignore turned furiously upon the innocent secretary, with all the "Villarosa temper" flaming in his face and voice.

"How dare you . . . ay, how dare you call by such foul names a lady whom you do not even



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know? You, forsooth, a priest, a minister of love and charity? Donna Delia Leoni——” but he stopped short, as abruptly as he had begun, blushed crimson to the roots of his white hair, and to the utter confusion and amazement of poor Don Paolino, rushed up to his study and locked himself in.



## CHAPTER VIII

### A SCHEMING PRELATE

AFTER that memorable evening some few weeks passed by in an apparent tranquillity; at all events, Don Paolino could not discover what was going on in Monsignore's mind, though he endeavored by varied stratagems to fathom the secret. Upon certain subjects there was no drawing out his master, who remained impenetrable. Especially the Villa Meroni and its mistress seemed to be utterly tabooed, so that, if the conversation appeared to drift even distantly in that direction Monsignore's lips would suddenly shut up as a trap, and the unfortunate questioner felt that he was butting against a brick wall. Only once had Villarosa pronounced her name: Don Paolino, discussing some unimportant topic concerning the garden, purposely spoke of her as "that woman over there," and Monsignore tartly admonished him that the name of that lady was Donna Delia Leoni, and that he had better not



forget it. As to Guido, Monsignore was considerably less reticent; with great satisfaction Don Paolino discovered that his master's resentment had simmered down to a notable extent, and that a reconciliation might become possible.

The truth was that in Villarosa's soul a deep, silent, tenacious conflict was raging, a conflict which must be faced to its bitter end. In a mind as alert as his, with the acutely sensitive conscience he possessed, the struggle must necessarily be a tremendously fierce one, and accordingly leave indelible traces. Monsignore grew rapidly thinner and more ascetic-looking, with an unquenchable flame burning steadily in his wistful eyes.

The attempt to answer his brother-in-law's questions revealed to him the importance of the battle which he must fight, but with his dauntless energy he never flinched from it. What could he say to Conte Calvello? The problem was far knottier than he at first imagined, the more so that, temperamentally, he could not stoop to crafty elusions of the great principles at stake. Neither could he resort to one-sided views or be untruthful in his statements about Delia. For nearly an entire night he labored, successively writing and tearing up many replies, then, as the



first rays of the rising sun mantled with a delicate blush his beloved snow-capped mountains, he wrote briefly and without hesitation that Donna Delia Leoni was the divorced wife of the Marquis de Tavernay, a French diplomat, a roué and a gambler, that she belonged to a very prominent family of Romagna well known for its services in behalf of Italian independence, that she was both beautiful and gifted, and that there was not the slightest blemish upon her reputation. He went on to say that, personally, he was grievously dismayed and saddened by Guido's intended union, because of the unhallowed desecration of the Divine laws, but that he was unwillingly forced to admit that the religious obstacle was the only one he could find, and to confess that he was facing, both in Guido and in this lady, a pure and noble attachment, which made the fulfilment of his duty, as he saw it, most distasteful to him, and the result of his efforts more than uncertain.

When Conte Calvello, who was very much a man of the world, received this reply to his inquiries, he was duly shocked at first, but after making judicious investigations in Rome, where the Leonis and the Tavernays were very well known, he came to the conclusion that after all the situation was far from being as bad as he



feared, and he accordingly wrote to his son, cautioning him, as a matter of course, about the decision he intended to take, but declaring that, all considered, he had neither the will nor the possibility of opposing the match, that, therefore, his future daughter-in-law would be affectionately received by him and his as a member of the family, provided, however, that he succeeded in altering the views of Monsignor Villarosa, whose opinion and goodwill were, it must be well understood, paramount and essential.

To Guido, however, Monsignore did not reply; for this he must necessarily reveal that, in compliance with his request, he had studied the case and found—found what? It was a most startling question offered to his conscience, and it drove him back to the very thickest of the fray raging in his soul. How could he ever humiliate himself and lay bare before the eyes of that mere boy the distracting confusion in which his faculties had been thrown? All the pride of his ecclesiastical station, all his vanity as an impeccable judge of consciences rebelled at the thought, and though contemptuously blaming this weakness, he could not master it, and so Guido's letter remained unanswered.

Early that October an important event seemed



to restore some, if not quite all, of Monsignor Villarosa's cheerfulness. During the preceding weeks, in spite of his work and cares, he had sedulously corrected the proofs of his volume. *The Symbolism of the Fourth Gospel* had so impressed the publishers by the depth and wisdom of its conclusions, the chaste beauty of its style, and the truly evangelical simplicity of its philosophy, that they had rushed the volume through the press. One day the mail brought an advance copy, and it was a most touching sight to witness the tenderness with which the author fondled his big volume; to him it was the embodiment of his life's ambition, the one child of his mind, the flesh of his flesh, the blood of his blood. All the mental agonies, the struggles, the problems, which hemmed in his soul from all sides were instantly forgotten, as if carried away by the irresistible tide of proud contentment which swept away everything before it. To Don Paolino he appeared as transfigured, rejuvenated, and radiating such a luminous aura of joy that the simple priest swore that he had clearly seen a halo around his master's silver curls. But the same Don Paolino became preternaturally grave and unresponsive when Monsignore rapturously announced to him that his book had come at last. The secretary's



hereditary distrust and dislike for any printed matter, his haunting fear of Rome's disapproval, and of its dangerous consequences, came back to him, a hundred times stronger now that the fatal book was irreparably before the public. In no measured terms he expressed his fears, but Villarosa did not even seem to hear him, and the good fellow was obliged to submit to the inevitable, swearing once more in his faithful heart to shield and protect his master as far as he was able.

Monsignor Villarosa's first volume created a world-wide sensation, a profound admiration for the author and his work being the dominant keynote. Without distinction of country or sect all critics proclaimed that it was a great and noble effort, and men of renown all over the world wrote him personal letters of congratulation and encouragement. Of course, the general public had only a faint echo of the stir created in the philosophical and literary circles; but soon the Italian daily press became alive to the fact, and excerpts from technical journals concerning the Bishop of Varese were translated and published. One discordant note in this harmonious concert of admiration was noticed by Don Paolino, and as he was perpetually on the *qui vive*, he called Monsignore's attention to it. The high personages of the



Roman hierarchy, the professors of the Collegio Romano, his colleagues in the episcopate to whom Monsignore had of course sent complimentary copies, unanimously refrained from expressing any opinions, merely acknowledging its reception; they evidently feared to express themselves in any way before they knew wherefrom the wind was going to blow.

And as yet there was no possible means of verifying what the supreme and visible Head of the Church, or rather, through him, his all-powerful but shadowy advisers, were thinking of Monsignor Villarosa's work. Rome, always proverbially cautious and slow, appeared, in contrast with the world's universal and instantaneous approval, even slower and more cautious than ever. But there was another ominous symptom, which was more generally remarked: the *Civiltà Cattolica*, the review universally considered as the one authorised mouthpiece of the Vatican, after setting down *The Symbolism of the Fourth Gospel* as one of the "Books Received" with the notice "To be reviewed later," had never mentioned the work again, this being an unmistakable sign that the Gesù had not yet made up its mind concerning it. However, in spite of these perplexing indications, in spite of the irrepressible croakings of



Don Paolino, Villarosa's elation and confidence in the final and decisive approbation of his Holiness could not be shaken.

The fashion in which the clergy of Monsignore's own diocese greeted the volume of their pastor was most instructive and almost pathetic. Of course, spiritually and scientifically, it was so far above the heads of the overwhelming majority that, in so far as they were concerned, it might as well have been written in some unknown and mysterious language. The deplorably low standard of education imparted to them in the seminaries, the meagre historical and literary store of information which they had, parrot-like, acquired during their so-called "studies" and then rapidly forgotten during many years of material routine and bookless sloth, certainly did not equip them to understand such a work. But they, notwithstanding, chattered very freely about it whenever they congregated, and with great curiosity asked endless questions of the few among them who were supposedly capable of reading the book, and maybe of understanding it. These elect, for their part, were suspiciously vague and undetermined in their replies, even the least wise among them realising that it was an impossibility for them to pass any judgment; consequently the clergy were



blandly proud and not a little surprised at the success of their Bishop.

Two men alone in the diocese would have been able to speak intelligently of Monsignor Villarosa's book: one was Don Sisto Prina, the journalist, the other Arciprete Sidoli. Prina could not possibly remain silent, but the sly fox, in the two high-sounding but vacuous articles he published in his paper, took scrupulous care not to say anything to which he could not adapt the most convenient signification at any given eventuality, the obstinate silence of the Vatican and of its organ seeming to him suspicious in the extreme. Sidoli, avowedly the chief of the Zelanti, would not speak, and, master-hypocrite that he was, masked his silence by pretending a self-debasing humility. To all who questioned him, even to Villarosa himself, who, knowing him to be his most dangerous enemy, had aggressively demanded his opinion, he replied, "Who am I that I should pass judgment upon the thoughts of my superior?" in such a tone that it was impossible to insist.

At the same time, this wave of success spurred on Monsignore to continue and to broaden his apostolate in favor of the peasants and to labor for their elevation to a higher intellectual and moral level; his anxiety to escape from the secret



struggle of his conscience caused him to intensify his episcopal activities. Accompanied by Don Paolino, perpetually grumbling at the "bewildering frenzy" of his master, though following him with the resignation of a martyr, the Bishop went from village to village, preaching, teaching, exhorting with a marvellous energy, a boundless patience, and a reckless expenditure of self. He lavished upon those untutored crowds priceless treasures of love and devotion, seeing nothing else before him but that high mission which his Divine Master had entrusted to his care as the one duty of his remaining days. His audiences listened with bated breath to his inspired words—they were unconsciously awed by the pure majesty of that figure, radiant with charity and self-sacrifice; but either immemorial ignorance had so thoroughly stunted their minds that they could not understand what they heard, or their brutal natures wilfully twisted his words into an encouragement to dispossess their landlords by fair means or foul. So, unfortunately, this loving mission of goodwill and progress became a firebrand throughout the land.

Early in the year it had been officially announced that in the autumn the Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan would convene a Synod of the archdiocese. All the Bishops of the ancient and



glorious Ambrosian Rite were invited to attend, expose their views concerning the spiritual welfare of their flocks, and then present corporately to the Holy Pontiff their several desiderata. Cardinal-Archbishop Baraldi, who had conceived this plan, was a small, insignificant man, who certainly did not look in the least a Prince of the Church. Homely in his aspect, and still more homely in his manners and speech, strongly flavored by his native Emilian dialect, he had risen with extraordinary luck and rapidity from Curato of a little village in the Western Apennines to Professor of Casuistics in the Seminario of Bologna, then to Bishop of Cesena, and finally to his present exalted position. The very few who knew him *intus et in cute* maintained that luck had really very little to do with Cardinal Baraldi's career; the wonderful flexibility of his spine, and intelligence, combined with an overpowering and remorseless ambition, had enabled him to wriggle, invincibly and untiringly, higher and higher. Moreover, under his craftily calculated mask of homeliness, Baraldi dissimulated a diplomatic capacity of the most dangerous class; for him dissimulation and prevarication were fine arts, and by nature he ignored the meaning of scruples or of conscience. His colleagues of the



Sacro Collegio eyed him dubiously, as they had yet been unable to "make him out," but treated him, nevertheless, with the greatest consideration, because it was whispered that he had by no means a bad chance at the Conclave, which every one was agreed must occur at no distant date.

Of course, Monsignor Villarosa had been invited to the Synod, and had dutifully accepted, though his retiring disposition did not make this acceptance an unmixed pleasure. But in the interval between the invitation to the Synod and its convening, the name of Villarosa, once practically unknown, had been repeatedly thrust into the most brilliant limelight by the press, and so the general public in Milan became mildly excited about his visit, and not unnaturally expected to hear a sermon from the newly discovered "great man." This, however, did not suit Baraldi in the least; it was bad enough that no one could withhold the right of a Bishop to be present at a Synod of the archdiocese, but he would take precautions "to muzzle this dangerous demagogue." The Archbishop had certainly no sympathy for the peasant class from which he himself had sprung; he knew that the landlords, representing the money-bags, and therefore disposing of the sword, had ever been the natural allies of the Church,



and, furthermore, Conte Meravigli was the Cardinal's bosom friend, so that the venom and hatred which had rankled in "Vinegar's" heart ever since the memorable encounter with the Bishop of Varese at Taino had full occasion of expressing itself. The vicious nobleman painted his enemy as black as his cutting tongue could make it, and poured into the prelate's receptive ears the whole history of Villarosa's past life, distorted, of course, by blind partisanship and prejudice, so that Baraldi firmly decided that, at any price, such an objectionable personage must not be allowed to speak.

It was, however, no easy task. The Cardinal was fully aware of the fact that it would be highly impolitic to ignore him from the outset; he knew that many of the lower clergy throughout the archdiocese swore by his name, and that, for the moment at least, the rural masses of Lombardy considered him almost a saint. He therefore must move with great prudence and circumspection, playing his cards in such a way that Monsignor Villarosa himself must be induced to abstain voluntarily from playing any prominent part in the Synod, and, above all, from addressing the assembled prelates on contentious subjects. As to the "set" sermons, he would prepare a trick that could not fail.



When the Synod was convened, Monsignor Villarosa was deep in his mission of explaining the duties of citizenship to the peasants, and accordingly very loath to leave his diocese even for a few days, but he always was most conscientious in the fulfilment of his pastoral duties, and a fervent, though silent, upholder of the historical rights and privileges of the Ambrosian Church, so when the day came, accompanied by Don Paolino, Monsignore left Casbenno to spend a week in Milan. The old Palazzo Villarosa, hidden away in the remote and now unfashionable purlieus of Via Cappuccio, that small and deserted Faubourg St. Germain of the Lombard metropolis, had been rented out in flats ever since the late Contessa had decided to reside permanently at Corgeno, and the small apartment, which had been reserved for the owner's use, consisted of three or four shabbily furnished and musty rooms. In spite of Don Paolino's insistence that a good hotel would be a more fitting abode for his Excellency, they came directly from the railway-station to the old Palazzo, and soon after drove to the Arcivescovado to call upon the Cardinal, as ecclesiastical etiquette demanded.

Cardinal Baraldi, as soon as Villarosa's name was announced, rushed to greet him in the gor-



geous Sala degli Arazzi, the beautiful hall of the State apartments; it was a sight to behold how the prelate's commonplace expression instantly assumed the sweetest and most delighted of smiles, how with breathless anxiety he pushed aside the several members of his household to be the first on the threshold, and how he greeted his visitor with cordial affection, subtly tinged with deference and admiration. He seemed most unwilling to drop Monsignore's delicate hand, and held it caressingly in both of his, which, in spite of all treatment, obstinately refused to become soft and white as befitted a Cardinal. With the fervor of a devoted disciple, he escorted the much-flattered Villarosa to his private study, and made him occupy the most comfortable arm-chair in the room. It would have been more than evident to any one that the simple, transparent soul of the Bishop was no match for his wily antagonist; in the first place, he did not consider him in that light, and, again, he was the last man in the world to suspect hidden motives, or, even when suspecting them, to know how to fence and prevaricate. Then his vanity, his *péché mignon*, had been delicately tickled, and this prepared him to accept blindly all that the Cardinal would propose. So, after a few irrelevant remarks about things in



general, Baraldi boldly broached the subject which interested him most.

"And now, my most reverend friend," the Cardinal began in a confidential yet earnest tone, "let me tell you how thankful I am for your early visit, as I am sorely in need of your wisdom to settle some momentous questions concerning our Synod. Of course, as senior Bishop, Nodari of Mantova is entitled to celebrate the first Pontifical Mass in the Duomo, and has set his mind upon preaching upon that occasion, though how the doddering old man, who, by the by, never could preach a decent sermon even in his palmiest days, will be able to fill the card Heaven only knows. But it is of no use; Nodari will not relinquish his rights, and our one consolation is that nobody can possibly hear what he may have to say."

There the Cardinal stopped as if waiting for a reply. Monsignore obediently took up the cue, but ever charitable, interposed hopefully that the Holy Ghost might inspire Nodari on such an occasion, a solution accepted by the Cardinal with a resigned but slightly sceptical shrug of his shoulders. Then Baraldi went on:

"The second Pontifical function in the Basilica of St. Ambrogio was yours by right, as the second



in seniority, and all the clergy and laity of this great city—myself more than any—anticipated with joy and reverence the privilege of listening to the inspired teachings of your apostolic eloquence . . . for, let me tell you without wounding your modesty, the whole world has been thrilled by your pastorals and sermons, but——” Here he sighed dolorously, with an expression of dejected embarrassment, as if coerced by dire necessity to divulge an objectionable secret. Monsignore patiently waited for the rest of the sentence, so Baraldi had to go on: “I am in a quandary and no mistake! While I still counted upon Nodari being unable or unwilling to expose his nonentity, Cardinal Zerboni of Bologna (and you know what *that* means) wrote requesting as a very particular favor that his Benjamin, Bishop Castelli of Pavia, should be given the second sermon, and I promised, fully expecting that you would replace old Nodari in the Duomo, so now ——” The Cardinal stuttered, then hesitated, then finally looked blankly at Monsignore, almost as invoking his help.

Instantly Villarosa rose to the bait. He had a very hazy idea of the relative importance of Cardinal Zerboni, for he knew nothing about the fluctuations of influence at the Vatican, but if he



could help in any way this charming man, even at his own disadvantage, he would do so at once, not counting that to preach in St. Ambrogio was an ordeal he did not relish overmuch. So with a charming smile and quite cheerfully he set to rest the anxiety of the scheming prelate by saying: "Your Eminence must not worry a moment about this affair; to be sure, I am only too pleased to serve you in any way I can. Let Monsignor Castelli preach in my stead; I am delighted that it should be so, and, furthermore, I need not preach at all, and in this way your Eminence can satisfy everybody."

Cardinal Baraldi, seeing that his victim was playing into his hand, allowed himself the luxury of overdoing his part; he became indignant at the thought of the expectant crowds, and of himself, above all, deprived of the intellectual and spiritual treat of listening to a Villarosa, and went so far as to insist that, Zerboni or no Zerboni, the Bishop of Pavia must be set aside, and apparently wrought himself into such a storm of excitement that poor Monsignore had to pacify and wheedle him into accepting his own self-effacement as the wisest plan.

This topic being satisfactorily disposed of, the Cardinal airily referred to the crucial subject: the



matters to be brought before the Synod. He began complaining about the unavoidable limitation of the time allowed for their session and the enormous mass of material brought before them, then he launched into a verbose and confused enumeration of the proposed themes. Villarosa listened patiently and attentively, but was struck at once by the puerile futility of the whole affair, which seemed to hinge exclusively upon empty details of form or disciplinary particulars, emptier still. There was not a ray of light and life in the whole drab picture, nothing uplifting or inspiring, not an attempt to solve one of the many grave problems facing the Church, and Monsignore's heart sank within him.

When he was able to place a word he diffidently remarked: "Does not your Eminence think that many of these themes are superannuated or of secondary importance? For example, the use of bicycles by priests or the size of the amice are subjects that could well be ignored, when such questions as the reform of the seminaries or the part priests might take in social questions, and their co-operation in the uplift of the lower classes, are right before us——"

The Cardinal, with a condescending little laugh, interrupted him: "Sixteen Bishops out of twenty-



one have invited me to present the bicycle problem, and the size of the amice has been called to my attention by his Holiness himself, who, as you know, greatly desires the integrity of the old ritual, so I fail to see how these subjects can be held as superannuated or secondary. Furthermore, I have no choice; the calendar of the Synod is complete, and I cannot possibly drag in other matters, except, of course, by a special command of his Holiness." Baraldi was for a moment silent, then, eyeing Monsignore very closely, he added in a low, confidential voice: "Certain topics, my worthy friend, are best severely left alone for the good of all parties concerned." Then, lowering his voice still more, almost to a whisper, as if fearing that the walls should have ears, he went on: "Between you and me, let me tell you that if I had the power things would be very different, but as things are now I am helpless, absolutely helpless . . . and must throw myself upon your generosity."

Monsignore stared at him in undisguised astonishment; then, as ever impulsive when appealed to in this fashion, he hastily said: "I cannot imagine in what way I can be of any help to your Eminence, but, whatever it may be, please command me freely."



Baraldi drew a heavy sigh, as a man liberated from a tremendous oppression, then murmured impressively: "May God bless you for your noble act. I foresaw, yet feared, your answer to my entreaties . . . though from one so wise and saintly as yourself . . . it was wicked to doubt. Pardon me! I am happy now. We will let sleeping dogs lie . . . for the present . . . and postpone our concerted action on those great schemes which stand nearest our hearts to a better day. Till then I count upon your silence."

Monsignor Villarosa was completely at sea, and shook hands in the warmest manner with the astute diplomat, promising to be silent upon he did not know what subjects. As a matter of fact he had never anticipated bringing before the Synod the agrarian problem, as he considered this a purely civil and social question, separate and distinct from the spiritual activities of the Church. According to him, the clergy must refrain from meddling in the management of the State, its real mission being to train the people up to the highest possible standard of Christian citizenship. He supposed that this educational work would be enthusiastically endorsed by the Synod, impenitent old dreamer that he was, and so had promised



to be silent in deference to the Cardinal, who, supposedly, had his good reasons.

Baraldi rose, as was his prerogative, to dismiss his visitor; now quite sure of success, the schemer clinched matters by saying to his victim: "I am a most busy man, with but little time for relaxation or study. I have here your wonderful volume of which the whole scientific world is ringing, and as soon as I can study it with the attention it deserves we will discuss it together!"

And so, greatly pleased and flattered, Monsignore left, escorted to the stairs by the Cardinal, still more profuse in his attentions.

However, as soon as the cab had started Don Paolino inflicted a jolt upon Monsignore's contentment. That worthy had waited for his master in the hall, and the dandified ecclesiastics of the Cardinal's household, after exchanging a few words with the rough-looking country priest, had soon tired of his uncouthness, and then forgotten his presence, so they chatted freely and carelessly about the approaching Synod. Don Paolino had not lost one word, and repeated textually the whole conversation to Monsignore; most of it was trivial tittle-tattle, to which Villarosa paid no great attention, but he sat up when he heard that "it had been an awful job to force



old man Nodari to come to the Synod and preach the first sermon." This, of course, was in flagrant contradiction to the Cardinal's version of the situation, and Monsignore gravely blamed Don Paolino for listening to and repeating such groundless falsehoods.

The Synod turned out to be, as Villarosa expected, an uninteresting and merely formal ceremony. Villarosa celebrated the Pontifical service in the Basilica of St. Ambrogio, before an immense crowd. A large number of men who habitually never frequented churches, even militant Socialists, came to see and hear "the celebrated Bishop of Varese"; so when another Bishop began a long and old-fashioned panegyric of the patron saint of Lombardy, hundreds left the church, disappointed and disgusted, and the lay papers commented upon this unexpected exclusion in a rather pointed tone. As to the proceedings of the Synod, Monsignore could not understand how prelates met to discuss seriously and at great length such utter rubbish, so, after being most diligent at the initial sessions, he soon was bored insupportably, and rarely went to the meetings, missing entirely the three last ones.

In the meanwhile Conte Meravigli was working



hard. The Synod must condemn unequivocally the agrarian agitation, and the part hitherto taken in it by the parish priests, thus inflicting a crushing blow upon Villarosa. Cardinal Baraldi having explained why the order to moot the subject must come directly from Rome, Meravigli, with the co-operation of Cardinal Bredana, the all-powerful Lombard member of the Curia, succeeded in obtaining a Papal Rescript, which was timed to arrive the very last day of the Synod; it demanded from it a clear expression of opinion upon the grave question. This written opinion, prepared long before, was voted unanimously and without discussion by the Bishops present, and incorporated in the so-called "Petition" which was to be forwarded to his Holiness. It read: "And, furthermore, we humbly call the attention of the Holy Father to the obnoxious and unchristian activities of certain unworthy members of our Church who are sapping the very basis upon which the Christian world had for ever rested, and awakening in the Godfearing inhabitants of the fields sentiments fully in opposition to the immemorial teachings of the Church, instilling in them meekness, humility, and resignation. And we, furthermore, humbly pray the Holy Father to silence these evil-minded and



unworthy members of the Church, regardless of the position they may occupy."

No more direct and terrible blow could have struck Monsignor Villarosa, nor could the conspiracy have been more cleverly or more venomously conceived. Having silenced him in anticipation, the deed was perfected when he could not raise his voice in self-defence.

Monsignore, knowing that the Synod was practically ended, had decided that afternoon to pay his visit *de congé* to the Cardinal, and take an evening train to Varese in order to be back in Casbenno before night. Don Paolino had busied himself with the valises, and all was ready, when a newsboy passed hawking the evening papers, and vociferously proclaiming, "The Condemnation of Bishop Villarosa!" Don Paolino, who heard him from the courtyard, thought that some one must be crazy; he rushed out, pounced upon the frightened newsboy, and, flinging him a penny, wrenched a paper from his hands. The heavy headlines stared him in the face. A popular sheet of ultra-radical tendencies had obtained by some unexplained means a copy of the Synod's petition, and printed *in extenso* that part referring to the agrarian agitation. Don Paolino's grief, dismay, and anger passed all bounds; forgetting



his cloth, he rapped out a frightful imprecation, but stood where he was as petrified, struck by the appalling problem of facing Monsignore. What was going to happen when he heard of this disaster? In justice to the secretary's faithful soul, it must be recorded that he never even thought of the hateful "I-told-you-so" he could present to his master; nothing but anxiety tormented him, and as he stood in helpless indecision he heard the voice of Monsignore asking aggrievedly of the *portinaio* where on earth Don Paolino was hidden.

Not finding words, Don Paolino rushed back into the lodge, and without a word thrust the paper into Monsignore's hand. In fear and trembling he watched his master's face as he quickly scanned the article. Monsignore went frightfully pale, then his eloquent eyes flashed an irresistible flame, his figure grew rigid, and suddenly appeared, to the awed wonder of Don Paolino, taller and more majestic than ever before. Villarosa turned to the old *portinaio* and ordered briefly that a cab be summoned at once, then, seizing his secretary not too tenderly by the arm, broke into a harsh and mirthless laugh:

"You were right and I was wrong, old friend! I have been beautifully tricked . . . the meeting



of Taino is bringing its fruits . . . but they have forgotten that my name is Guido Villarosa, and, as God is my judge, his Holiness will hear me . . . and then they will sing another tune! The battle is now on; truth and light must win, in spite of all. To begin with, I am going straight to tell Cardinal Baraldi what I think of him! You'll see . . . you'll see it is going to be a grand and beautiful fight . . . and we will win!"

The feverish aggressiveness of Monsignore frightened and bewildered poor Don Paolino more than anything else; he instinctively realised that his beloved master was about to butt against a brick wall and be shattered in the unequal encounter. But there was no time to speak, almost none even to think, much less the possibility of modifying this dangerous mood; Monsignore, animated by a tremendous energy, with the scent of powder dilating his nostrils, was ready in a trice, impatiently waiting for the cab, into which he bundled Don Paolino before it had properly stopped, ordering the coachman to drive as fast as possible to the Arcivescovado. On the way, again, Don Paolino could not place a word; Monsignore, in a flurry of ill-repressed passion, kept up an unceasing fire of interjections about all that was going to happen, about his plans and pre-



visions, so there was not the possibility of edging in a word. But the secretary's face became so expressive that Monsignore could not help noticing it.

"Do not fret, dear old friend," he said with a return to his usual tenderness; "it will be all right in the end! I have never felt better nor stronger . . . so do please smile . . . and look up, man, look up!"

Don Paolino was going to reply, when the cab came abruptly to a halt before the entrance of the Arcivescovado, and Villarosa jumped out with all the agility of a young man.

Fate favored the Bishop. He ran up the monumental staircase just in time to encounter Cardinal Baraldi descending it with Conte Meravigli. The confederates were discussing with great satisfaction and gusto the success of their plot, though the Cardinal, always circumspect, regretted the precocious divulgence of the so-called "condemnation" of Villarosa, while Meravigli, bursting with gratified venom, gloated at the thought of the cruel wound suddenly and brutally inflicted upon his enemy. When they least expected it, they found themselves face to face with the man they had so cruelly deceived and injured. It was a dramatic moment; no one



spoke, till Baraldi, a diplomat ever, bowed slightly and said in a honeyed voice: "It is too bad . . . I fear that I am losing the pleasure of your visit, Monsignor Villarosa!"

Villarosa disdained to follow this lead; he drew himself up to his full height, and in his clear, musical voice replied: "Equivocation is no longer needed, your Eminence, and I come to exercise my rights of appending a minority resolution to the Synod's petition."

Baraldi, with subtle impertinence, asked if Monsignore had been present at the last meeting, and at the curt negative he smoothly replied: "Why, Monsignore, I hardly ought to remind you that the petition was approved by a unanimous vote, so that there cannot possibly be a minority report when no minority exists." And with this he indicated by a slight movement that the conversation was ended and that he wished to resume his descent.

Then the "Villarosa temper" blazed forth irresistibly: "I have been deceived, shamefully tricked and deceived!" he exclaimed "by those Pharisees who are now defiling God's own temple, and they triumph . . . but they will not prevail! Through His Vicar, Christ will scourge them once more out of His sanctuary, and if it cost me



my life, I, Guido Villarosa, will labor to that end!"

With a sweeping gesture, which included the Cardinal and Meravigli, he was going to retrace his steps, when the latter, triumphant and furious at the same time, clamored violently after him: "Is not one lesson sufficient, you Bishop of the Red Shirt? We'll give you another and final one . . . don't doubt it!"

Monsignore smiled back with withering contempt, then in a penetrating voice which rang again in the vaulted staircase he cried: "Good-bye, Cardinal Baraldi; your hound is baying, but beware of the wounded lion . . . he is still alive!" And with the majesty of a king he passed slowly out of their sight.



## CHAPTER IX

### A CHARGE AND A HALT

THE journey back to Varese, only an hour in a luxurious electric train, was a very sad one indeed, its gloom being tempered, however, for Monsignore by the unmistakable attitude of his numerous fellow-travellers. The news of the condemnation of the Bishop of Varese, and the devious fashion in which it had been brought about, had spread like wildfire all over Milan, and with very few exceptions Lombards of all parties resented the outrage perpetrated upon their illustrious compatriot. This feeling of the crowd was demonstrated by a general uncovering of heads, and by the low but distinct murmur of sympathy which ran through the crowd as Monsignor Villarosa wended his way to the train. This soothed his sorely wounded soul, but this feeling, unfortunately, strengthened his illusion that his countrymen would stay by him to the end.

As to Don Paolino he was utterly speechless and



shattered. From that terrible encounter at the Arcivescovado until after they had started he was more dead than alive. Suddenly recovering his senses, he exploded. In a low voice, because the carriage was crowded, but with tremendous earnestness, he reminded Monsignore of all his efforts to arrest "that mad undertaking." With the remarkable but rough common-sense of the Lombard hillman, he pointed out pitilessly how and why his master had placed himself in that cruel situation. Monsignore was too much a saint and a gentleman to know how to fence with those able scoundrels; if he had wished, in spite of this, to enter upon this conflict, he ought to have armed himself with the same weapons of deceit and unscrupulousness as his adversaries. What was now the outcome of it all? Nothing but a pitiful failure, nothing but disappointment and misery! It was a terribly hard price to pay, but it must be a lesson to Monsignore, and as he could still beat a retreat, he must do so at all costs. "Believe me, my dear master, and follow at last my poor advice," Don Paolino concluded. "As soon as you are back at home, write a nice letter to his Eminence the Cardinal, explaining how you spoke in a moment of comprehensible anger, but that, on second thoughts, and as be-



comes an obedient priest, you bow to the will of the majority and beg to sign the petition as it stands. Stop your preaching to the peasants, beasts who will turn upon you at the first opportunity, and if they still wish to fight, let them do so alone; live as you did before, serenely and peacefully, and above all, for mercy's sake, do not dream of appealing *down there*," and according to his custom, he repeatedly jerked his right thumb over his left shoulder.

Monsignore, lost in his bitter thoughts, had vaguely listened to his secretary's long oration, lulled to repose by the easy swing of the train. But this brazen proposal of abjuring for his own welfare the sacred mission which he firmly believed God Himself had entrusted to him, this shameless, though well-meant, advice to become a traitor to those who had confided to him all their hopes and aspirations, roused him as if suddenly struck in the face. Monsignore gripped with an iron clutch the arm of Don Paolino, and in a voice terrible because so low and intense he murmured into his ear: "If it were not you who were speaking, I would make you swallow every one of your words, priest and bishop though I am." Then with one of his lightning changes his face lost its formidable expression of ire, a smile cast over it a beau-



tiful ray of deathless faith and hope, and he continued softly: "Paolino, my son, your advice would no doubt be the best, for any one, but not for Guido Villarosa. You may be as wise as the serpent, but you libel both his Holiness and the peasants; the Vicar of Christ cannot but follow his Master, and the peasants, they love and trust me, and nothing can come between us. We are therefore invincible. The enemies of truth may have won to-day, but this will only make their final discomfiture more complete. So, Paolino, cheer up, and do not let me hear any more of your pitiful fears." In that moment the train stopped in the station of Varese, and Don Paolino could not insist on the subject.

Monsignore indited at once his protest to Rome, and mailed copies of it to the Holy Congregation of the Regulars, to the Papal Cancellaria, and, personally, to his Holiness. It was an admirably lucid *exposé* of the agrarian question, of the aims and intention of the reformers, and proved that the Synod had sentenced in a purely secular matter over which it had no jurisdiction, or, conceding its right to sentence, it had done so with partisam spirit, in obvious contradiction with the law of Christ, invariably on the side of the poor and oppressed. He accordingly asked that the para-



graph of the petition concerning the agrarian question should be expunged by the highest authority of the Church. Then, as if nothing untoward had happened, Monsignore took up the thread of his usual existence. He was, of course, aware that the jurisdictional machinery of the Vatican was proverbially slow in its movements, that his protest would reach its destination at the same time as, if not before, the Synod's petition, and that for many weeks no decision would be reached, so, considering the whole controversy still *sub judice*, he imperturbably continued his sermons to the various parishes of his diocese. Don Paolino in their private conversations fretted and fumed and predicted all sorts of misfortunes, but it was all wasted breath. And, what was still more dangerous, an aggressive tone developed itself unconsciously in Monsignore's sermons: there was nothing definite or personal, of course, but a constant reminder of how the Israelites had to fight for the Promised Land, and the advice to keep their loins girded for the coming struggle. Highly imprudent words; as they could be, and were, construed as an incitation to open revolt.

In the initial plan for the visit of all the parishes of the diocese, Castiglione-Olona, Conte Mervigli's great estate and country seat, had, of course,



been included. Don Paolino tried by all possible means in his power to prevent this visit, as he foresaw that it would envenom still more the hatred of the powerful landlord; he bullied the Curato of the village, a scared rabbit of a little man, afraid of his own shadow, into personally entreating the Bishop not to preach in Castiglione-Olona, on the plea that Conte Meravigli would wreak his revengeful fury upon the aforesaid Curato. The incensed Villarosa stormily reminded the unhappy priest that as soldiers of Christ they must accomplish their duty, irrespective of consequences, and the poor little fellow, more dead than alive, cowered in confusion, and, when dismissed, fled as fast as his trembling legs could take him. But this sermon at Castiglione was destined to produce consequences of momentous and almost tragical importance.

The peasants of the large village of Castiglione and of the neighboring Lomazzo, of which Don Davide Capelletti was Curato, were, with few rare exceptions, tenant-farmers of Conte Meravigli. Ruled with a rod of iron by their master, they had not, as yet, participated in the general movement of the district, with the early exception in Lomazzo of the few dependents of Don Felice Ranzi, whom they had so effectively routed upon



the day of his encounter with Monsignore on his way to Corgeno. But their sullen demeanor, their dark and scowling glances whenever they met the Conte, the *fattore*, or the overseers, their whispered conversations at dusk in the dark alleys were symptoms that a serious trouble was brewing. Meravigli, who from the very beginning had steadfastly advocated violent repression, urging the Government to stifle the movement at its inception by intimating that a little blood-letting was the best remedy for the disease, heard of Villarosa's imminent visit, and, crazed by fear and fury, at last persuaded the Prefetto to be in readiness for this repression, but, as Fate willed it, Monsignor Villarosa suddenly anticipated his visit by twenty-four hours, and so, on that day, there was not even a single *carabiniere* in the village.

In the church, packed almost to suffocation, Villarosa stepped on to the pulpit; his pale, ascetic face, his commanding presence, the vague knowledge of his personal enmity with their hated master struck the crowd with irresistible power. They did not cheer him, simply because they were in a church, but the murmur which ran through that mass of humanity was far more eloquent than any cheers. In a silence so perfect that the church might have been empty, Villarosa



began to speak. A great orator always because a profoundly convinced one, his impromptu address was a sublime effort, far outshining his preceding sermons. The text, from Psalm xliii., could not have been more appropriate: "O send me Thy light and Thy truth: let them lead me: let them bring me unto Thy holy hill and to Thy tabernacles." He outlined in rapid and masterly strokes the battle they must win to attain the full understanding of the light and of the truth of God, how this understanding would never lead them if they did not practise to its fullest extent forgetfulness of self, if they did not love their brethren more than themselves, if they did not strive incessantly to elevate their minds and the minds of those around them from ignorance, prejudice, and superstition, if they did not labor together to become the best of citizens for the glory and greatness of their beloved Italy. As he went on, carried away by the ardent flame of faith burning within him, his voice grew more penetrating and intense, till when he pictured the recompense of these long and patient strivings, when they would come into their own "on the holy hill and in the tabernacles," and painted in magnificent colors the greatness of their triumph and the happiness and dignity of their redemption, it sounded like



a clarion proclaiming a wonderful victory. Not a sound disturbed the awed silence of the vast crowd at the end of the sermon, but when the Bishop solemnly intoned the "Veni, Creator Spiritus," such a tremendous wave of melody rang through the old church that it seemed to rock in its very foundations.

Villarosa's improvisation was, no doubt, the very essence of spiritual truth, but he had committed his usual mistake of believing that his audience could fully understand and appreciate his meaning. Of all he had told them, they only comprehended that Monsignore himself was urging them on to fight for that great victory he had so vividly presented to them, and this victory, to their greedy and untutored minds, meant nothing but material advantages and revenge upon those who had ground them so long in the mire under an iron heel. Above all, they had been long upon the verge of open revolt: this sermon was the spark that started the conflagration. As the crowd poured out into the street, isolated cries of "Viva Villarosa!" blended into one universal roar, then, at first almost timidly, but rapidly increasing in volume and fury, other cries of "Morte a Meravigli!" broke forth. In the shabby rectory the poor little Curato, trembling and



blanched with fear, fell on his knees before Monsignore imploring him to leave at once, as his departure would mean the immediate dispersion of the crowd. Don Paolino chimed in with the Curato, and Monsignore, though hating with all his soul to appear a coward, contemptuously consented to satisfy his host. So by a back way they drove off unseen, and the much troubled secretary could not help cooling his master's elation at the success of his sermon by casually asking whether it was not remarkable that Don Davide Capelletti, arch-mover of the Peasants' League, whose parish was not a stone's-throw from Castiglione, had not been present.

In spite of the announcement of the Bishop's departure, the crowds refused to scatter; the most infuriated among the peasants sedulously kindled the flame of insurrection, and soon loud cries of "To the Castello!" were heard. A compact mass of men and women, with the flag of the local section of the Peasants' League, rushed towards the Palazzo Meravigli. By a stroke of misfortune, the crowd met two of the most hated overseers, armed with shot-guns; these men arrogantly asked the reason of all this row, ordering the people to get home at once. With a howl of fury the mob seized the two men before they could use



their weapons, wrenched the guns from their hands, broke them to fragments, and beat the guards so unmercifully that they lay in the gutter, bleeding and senseless. Conte Meravigli and his *fattore* from the grounds of the Palazzo heard the furious outcry and were just able to close the massive gate in the nick of time. Thus thwarted, the mob, with violent cries of hatred and derision, tore up the heavy cobblestones of the road and furiously bombarded the house, while the most heated attempted to tear the gates from their sockets. Green with rage and terror, Meravigli with his followers had to retreat and barricade themselves in the Palazzo. When in comparative safety, Meravigli took to the telephone, and, after several frantically unavailing attempts, managed to call up the Prefetto himself, breathlessly imploring him to save their lives, as two of his men had already fallen victims to the murderous rebels. But after a while the crowd grew tired of uselessly stoning a blank wall and dispersed.

When a couple of hours later magistrates with *carabinieri* and police hurriedly arrived upon the scene, they found the village deserted and as silent as death, the houses closed and barred, and did not find a soul in the street. The magistrates



were provided with a decree of dissolution of the local section of the Peasants' League, as being an association dangerous to public order, and of warrants against each of the members of its Board, charged with conspiracy, armed riots, and attempted murder. Not one of the accused men had personally taken part in the uprising, as though in perfect sympathy and understanding with the rioters, they had with careful shrewdness kept far from their activities, as they well understood that they would be the first to be accused. With great dispatch and thoroughness the bare room in which the section met was raided, every scrap of paper collected and packed, and then, at a given signal, the agents broke into the several houses of these members of the Board, handcuffed the terrified men, not without handling them very roughly, and, amidst the yelling women and howling children, dumped their prisoners into waiting automobiles and rushed them full speed to the prison in Varese.

The news of the "uprising of Castiglione-Olona" spread like wildfire all over the country, and the Conservative press, tied hand and foot to the landed interests, virulently attacked Monsignor Villarosa as directly responsible for the drama, going so far as to counsel the Government to take



measures for the immediate impeachment of the principal culprit. The anarchists, always prepared to spread their bloody propaganda, went secretly from village to village instigating the masses to reprisals and playing upon their native greed, so that nearly all over the district the peasants broke suddenly loose from the control of their parish priests and paraded through the streets with threatening cries of "Death to our masters!" while incendiary fires of ricks and barns broke out in several places. The peasants soon took up the watchwords of "Liberation of the Board of Castiglione or general strike," and the Government, in great haste, sent detachments of troops throughout the province.

Poor Monsignore, in those terrible days, was ascending his Calvary alone. He saw with unspeakable agony the whole of his luminous dream of redemption and progress crumble to dust around him, leaving him naked and disarmed in the sight of his enemies. Estranged from his beloved nephew, whose presence and tenderness might have soothed the bitterness of this darksome hour, he could not even turn to Don Paolino for consolation and sympathy; the good and devoted secretary lacked the delicacy of touch necessary to treat the now morbidly sensitive soul of his



master. In his heart, Monsignore recognised that it would be unprecedented for the Roman Curia not to approve the sentiments of such a large majority of Bishops, and that consequently his spirited attack against the misrule of the great landowners was only a forlorn hope, without a chance of success.

The violent language of the Conservative press and the prosecution it invoked from the Government did not touch him, but he knew that the venom it distilled would irreparably poison the love and sympathy of his fellow-citizens, who always detested attacks on private property. Then, and this was the bitterest thrust of all, he saw that the peasants, whom he had idealised as the future backbone and sinew of his country, were broken reeds, cankered to the very roots by malignity, greed, egoism, and ignorance, ready to be wafted away from their true friends at the first call of those who knew how to awaken the brutal appetites of their degenerate souls. And, underlying this ceaseless rush of agonising thoughts, deeply riven in his conscience ever since his encounter with Delia, there was the awful doubt that he had ever purposely and criminally closed his ears and eyes to the eternal verities of life, and that his narrow and formal creed was



nothing but a pitiful travesty of the Divine truth.

Only one hope remained to him in his desolation. He trusted in the goodness and wisdom of his Holiness; the Pope's open countenance, his kindly eyes, the fact that he himself came from peasant stock, all he had heard of his homely, placid, yet far-seeing kindness and impartiality, gave Monsignore ample reason to centre his hopes in a direct and personal appeal to the Pontiff. The more he pondered upon the painful problems before him, the more a plan of defending his case personally in Rome took form and consistence in his mind. The coincidence that it was nearly time he should pay his formal visit *ad limina Petri* furnished an excellent excuse for the journey, and though Monsignore never mentioned his intention to any one, he never ceased thinking about it.

The agrarian crisis was becoming every day more acute and numerous symptoms indicated that something serious was going to happen; in many villages, riots, of no great importance it is true, had taken place, and a number of arrests had been made during the forcible dispersion of the rioters. Up to that moment the peaceful little city of Varese had escaped from all disturb-



ance, although it had been more than once announced that the peasants had the intention of coming in great numbers to demand the instant liberation of the detained members of the Board of the Castiglione League; nothing happened, however, so the threat was considered only as an empty rumor and no precautions taken. But, unexpectedly, the night before the usual monthly market, huge crowds of peasants began to pour in on all sides, much to the uneasiness of the local authorities, who immediately communicated by telephone with the Prefetto in Milan, and asked for troops to reinforce their scanty town police, helplessly outnumbered; the military commander, though the forces at his disposal had been greatly depleted by the many detachments stationed all over the rural districts, rushed by special train to Varese a squadron of horse artillery, without their guns, of course. By seven in the morning, more than ten thousand men, women, and children packed the broad market field, and their numbers were growing each moment by the arrival of new crowds from the more immediate neighborhood. This dense mass of humanity was unusually sullen and silent, and obviously not come to trade, so the boothkeepers, seeing that there was no business doing, and probabilities of



loss and damage, soon closed up shop and retired. Police and mounted artillerymen endeavored, with great patience but not much success, to keep the crowd on the move, and so nothing untoward happened for a while.

That same day Villarosa was to celebrate an annual function in the cathedral, and, always punctual in the fulfilment of his canonical duties, he started from Casbenno in the closed landau, as it was a chilly, bleak, and threatening morning. Don Paolino was struck by the suffering expression of his master's emaciated face, the ashen pallor of which intensified the pathetic wistfulness of his eyes, now seeming abnormally large. As he narrowly watched Monsignore, wearily sitting back in his corner, for the first time the faithful fellow was assailed by the appalling premonition that the master whom he loved so deeply had been marked as his own by the Reaper. With all the unconcern he could muster, he inquired whether anything ailed his Excellency, insisting that they should return home at once, send for Dr. Sandri, and advise Arciprete Sidoli that Monsignore could not be present at the function because indisposed. With a wan little smile, and a pitiful attempt to appear cheerful, Monsignore dismissed the proposition, remarking that he would



not give Sidoli the satisfaction of insinuating that Monsignor Bishop was wise in playing sick at that time. He added serenely: "I'll stick to it to the end, Paolino, my son, and then rest . . . rest in peace . . . do not fear . . . it is all for the best," and so the carriage went on upon its way.

At the outskirts of the town, just when turning into the usual street, the carriage was halted by a *delegato* of police, who, hat in hand, informed Monsignore that he had strict orders not to allow any vehicular traffic in that direction, as the Piazza del Mercato was jammed with people and it was safer to abstain from all that could create confusion. He directed the coachman to take another and more devious route, and bowed himself respectfully away, while Monsignore, who had listened to what he said with no little concern, started visibly as he recognised in the escort of the *delegato* a soldier in the black and yellow uniform of Guido's regiment.

As they drove through the streets, the number of peasants increased very rapidly, till, when they finally arrived into the main street, a narrow, crooked, old-fashioned thoroughfare, lined on each side with low arcades, it was so thick with humanity that it became impossible to proceed otherwise



than at a snail's pace. The trolley-line which ran through it, with its heavy cars, impeded still more the circulation as during their passage the crowds were obliged to pile up on the sides the best they could. This crowd was almost exclusively composed of peasants who had come from all parts of the diocese, and they all promptly recognised the well-known green liveries of the Villarosa equipage; but only a few, a very few, uncovered their heads as the carriage passed slowly by, while the faces of all retained their hostile and sullen expressions. In the last survival of his innocent vanity, poor Monsignore perhaps had for a moment the hope that those for whom he had labored and suffered so much would greet him once more with their enthusiastic cheers. But no! even a large group of his own tenants of Corgeno stared unseeingly at him and did not vouchsafe one sign of recognition. So, sadder and bitterly mortified, as the carriage came to a standstill before the side entrance of the cathedral he disappeared hurriedly within the semi-opened portal.

In the meanwhile, the crowds occupying the Piazza del Mercato grew gradually more refractory and less willing to obey the directions of the police, and opposed, by sheer weight of numbers,



a passive yet insurmountable resistance to the efforts of the troops. With admirable patience the mounted artillerymen kept their spirited mounts from trampling upon the women and children, seemingly disposed to get purposely under the hoofs of the horses. Suddenly an incident occurred which precipitated the unavoidable outbreak: the *delegato*, directing the police in that section, recognised, sneaking through the crowd, a dangerous anarchist against whom a warrant of arrest had long been pending. Instantly he pointed him out to his agents, and at the head of a dozen of them made a dash for the man; to reach him, he had to force his way through the dense crowd, and at once a furious struggle was raging. The peasants, imagining that they were wantonly attacked, offered a stubborn resistance; blows were freely exchanged, women and children howled and shrieked, that terrible weapon, the *falcetto*, a sort of heavy pruning-knife which the Lombard hillman invariably carries hanging from his belt, began to flash forth, and, in self-defence, the police drew their revolvers. However no blood was shed, and the policemen, much battered and bruised, managed to arrest the anarchist and some of the most infuriated around him. Forming a compact knot of agents around



their prisoners, they retreated slowly towards the jail. Instantly the cries of "Molla! molla!" meaning "Let them go!" so often heard as a sinister forerunner of bloody riots, broke forth violently from the crowd, now turned into one seething, howling mass. The few artillerymen, isolated and helpless, were swept away as if by an overpowering tide; a thick hailstorm of stones which no human being could withstand struck the body of agents with their charges, so that they were compelled to abandon the kicking and struggling prisoners and to seek safety in precipitous flight. Elated by this success, an unanimous cry of "To the jail!" broke from the mob, and in one tumultuous column they headed for the main street.

This thoroughfare was even more crowded and impassable than when Monsignore's carriage had crossed it, but the passage of the trolley-cars had unaccountably not been stopped, and this was a source of growing irritation to the crowd; one of these cars, though advancing by inches, knocked down a loutish and ragged youth, evidently a jail-bird, who with some confederates was purposely standing on the track, yelling insults to the motorman. Instantly a roar of fury broke from the mob, now prodigiously augmented by the dense column of infuriated rioters coming from



the Piazza del Mercato; in a second the passengers were kicked and cuffed out of the car, some ladies not excepted, while the unfortunate motorman and conductor were so ferociously mauled that their lives were despaired of. The mob, worked up into a state of frenzy, rapidly smashed the car and succeeded in overturning it crosswise, so that it effectively blocked the street.

Meanwhile, the dispersed police had reorganised, and now faced the much more serious job of clearing the street; they charged the crowd with great resolution, but the rioters were protected by the improvised barricade, and under the continual hail of stones the agents were unable to make any progress.

Revolvers barked here and there, and, none too soon, a squadron of mounted artillerymen galloped into view; the officer in command gave an order, and the first bugle-call to disperse, according to the Riot Act, rang out loudly. The mob had stopped the stoning, and, understanding that a cavalry charge was threatened, as by a preorganised arrangement, pushed rapidly to the front a mass of women and children, in the hope that the troops would hesitate to gallop them down. Then the second call of the bugle sounded menacingly in the silence which had succeeded to the mad



uproar; a brief, resonant command from the officer and a hundred sabres flashed simultaneously out of their scabbards. A breathless moment of suspense ensued, rendered even more awful by the apparition of a second squad of artillerymen on foot, under the porticoes, with their muskets at the ready. It was clear now that the troops had precise orders to fire, and in that narrow street the execution of the order would have been appalling.

In that moment, Monsignor Villarosa, having imparted the last Benediction, was descending from the High Altar of the empty cathedral. He saw around him the eager and anxious faces of the Canons, as they whispered excitedly among themselves, and his arch-enemy, Arciprete Sidoli, covertly indicating him and mournfully shaking his head. Though absorbed in his religious duties, the confused but violent rumors of the street had reached his ears, and Monsignore guessed that something very grave was going on outside, something of which Sidoli was throwing the responsibility upon his shoulders. Pausing at the bottom of the altar steps, he beckoned imperiously to the Arciprete, and in clear tones asked him what was going on.

"A revolution, your Excellency," was the reply;



“the troops are about to fire on the crowd of peasants, just in front of the cathedral! There are barricades, and——”

Monsignore turned round to the Canons, his face agleam with intrepid faith and enthusiasm, and in his most sonorous and musical voice he exclaimed: “Let us at once to our posts, my brothers, to stop with our own bodies, if needed, this awful fratricide. Open wide the portals of the cathedral and follow me.”

In his magnificent vestments, the heavy jewelled mitre on his head, the pastoral crosier in his hand, he rapidly led the way, followed by the terrified Canons, who, shaking with fear, were of course forced to obey.

Down in the main street, not more than thirty yards away, the sharp, imperious notes of the bugle blared forth for the third time. It was the signal for the impending charge, and Monsignore hurried as much as his attire would allow him, so that he came upon the scene, an imposing yet highly pathetic figure, just at the instant when, at a sharp order of their officer, the artillerymen started at a hand gallop towards the swaying mass of women. Between them and the troops there was a clear space of about a hundred yards, and in this space Monsignore came unconcernedly



to a halt, while the Canons, out of sheer panic, in the fatuous hope of getting out of the line of fire, sank upon their knees around him. The squadron came on, now at full gallop, thundering over the cobblestones, with the officer bending low on his saddle at the head. Then Monsignore, standing as if to force physically the contending parties asunder, lifted high above his head his outstretched palms, in an attitude so noble, so impressively commanding, so intrepid, that every single person in that vast crowd, though excited by unbridled passions, felt the influence of his magnetic power. The artillerymen, however, had not checked their charge, and the officer was almost upon Monsignore, when he was heard to scream frantically, "Halt!" while, with a herculean effort, he reined back his rearing steed on to its haunches. The impetus was so great that, despite his promptness, the horse before coming to a halt brushed against Monsignore's shoulder, making him stagger back as if about to fall, but the officer was off his saddle with a mighty bound, and caught the old gentleman in his arms, passionately clasping him to his breast.

What ensued is better imagined than described: the artillerymen, at the sight of their commander supporting this magnificent apparition, inexplica-



bly risen in front of them as if out of some Golden Legend of another age, halted and presented sabres, while the crowd of peasants, stricken by some unexplained and superstitious panic, gave one mighty inarticulate roar, and fell prone upon their knees. For a short moment Villarosa stood proudly towering above this vast mass of humanity, humbled and vanquished by the irresistible power of his great soul. That was really his apotheosis, the crowning instant of his life, and a last great wave of gratified pride surged in his breast as, before fainting in the arms of his Guido, he blessed in one comprehensive and loving gesture the populace and the troops.

Then, as by enchantment, the crowds dispersed silently and so swiftly that the peaceful disappearance of thousands who had come evidently with the worst intentions partook of the miraculous. The general results of the day, however, were meagre and quite unsatisfactory to all parties. The landlords appreciated the fact that the backbone of the revolt had not been broken, though immensely weakened by the failure of the great demonstration; the peasants, on their side, understood that they had no longer any chance against the now fully prepared landlords, and, in the overpowering selfishness of their individualism, each



thought for his own person and welfare, unmindful of the solidarity necessary to the common good. The unsuccessful movement left behind an abyss between landlords and tenants deeper than ever, and germs of hatred and revenge that would unavoidably mature at some future time, but, at the moment, everything fell back into the *statu quo ante*: the pact of Taino was tacitly abandoned even by Meravigli and its other instigators, who unobtrusively and almost secretly made many concessions for the material betterment of their farmers; but likewise, the settlement of Corgeno, Monsignore's pet scheme, remained a solitary and almost pathetic memento of what might have been. And finally, with the simultaneous disappearance of all anarchistic agitators from the district, complete, if not lasting, peace was re-established.

And Monsignore? He found himself lying on a couch in a chemist's shop, with his "boy" kneeling beside him, while Don Paolino, in a wild state of agitation, and Dr. Sandri, cool and collected, were plying him with restoratives; in the background, Sidoli and several Canons were looking on with more curiosity than genuine interest. As the old gentleman opened his eyes, his first act was to stroke lovingly the bowed head of his



nephew; Guido, with an exclamation of joy and relief, seized those trembling fingers and kissed them repeatedly, but when Monsignore attempted to open his mouth and sit up, Sandri interfered decisively with his short, explosive sentences:

“Talking prohibited. Absolutely. No more pranks to-day. No, sir. I’m going to take you home and put you to bed. Must try and patch up that heart! It’s no steam-engine. You, young warrior, go at once to your duty, or there’ll be trouble, I warrant! Left face, march!” and in spite of their resistance, he took Guido by the shoulders and walked him out of the small shop. Then turning abruptly to Don Paolino: “Stop that noise, and work for once in your life. I will take Monsignore by the arms. You take his feet. We carry him to the carriage——”

Monsignore faintly but indignantly declared that he could and would walk, and, repulsing them both, staggered painfully to his feet. Sidoli and the Canons came forward in apparent concern and sympathy, but Monsignore, before they could open their mouths, curtly bowed to these men, and leaning heavily upon the arms of the doctor and Don Paolino, passed out to the waiting carriage.

Slowly and with all precautions they drove to



Casbenno. Sandri did not allow his patient to open his mouth, but easily anticipating what Monsignore wanted to know, he satisfied his curiosity: "Yes, crowds all gone. Not a cat left. It was a crazy thing to do, your Excellency. The craziest and most magnificent thing I ever saw or heard of! Now better be nursed back to sanity and health. Yes, of course, the warrior will run down to Casbenno as soon as he can get a moment's liberty. So be peaceful and consoled. I must set you on your legs again!"

As to Don Paolino, he was absolutely speechless; to his simple nature, elemental and primitive in its instincts, the heroism of his master passed all comprehension. It placed him in another and higher sphere, so immeasurably above the heads of them all, that he almost ceased to be human, and that the good secretary could have gone down on his knees before him in adoration.

The episcopal villa was soon reached, and Monsignore was put to bed, propped up by many pillows, as his breathing was still much labored. Sandri, who wished above all that there should be no talking or other causes of excitement, drew Don Paolino to the other end of the room, telling his patient to close his eyes and try to go to sleep. However, Monsignore did not even pretend to do



so: his thoughts seemed clearer and more active than they had ever been before, and he suffered them to range freely upon all the questions which recently had so sorely tormented his conscience and his mind. He felt a curious uplift from the petty considerations of this earth, and his spirit nearer to the full comprehension of the Eternal Truth, yet with all his vanity evaporated, humble and confiding as a little child. He gazed out of his broad window upon the glorious semicircle of snowy mountains which surround his native highlands; after a gloomy day, the sun was setting in a golden glory, and as he gazed, his pensive expression melted into one of surpassing tenderness. His eyes were arrested one moment by the chimneys of the Villa Meroni, and a wonderful smile, which no one saw, hovered an instant upon his lips. Then, with a sigh of relief, he serenely closed his eyes.

When Guido reached the villa at last, and with Don Paolino and Sandri came near the bed, Monsignore was sleeping peacefully and still smiling in his sleep. On tiptoe they left the room.



## CHAPTER X

### A LETTER AND A JOURNEY

THE serious shock inflicted on Monsignore's extremely sensitive nervous system had greatly concerned Dr. Sandri, as he feared its consequences upon the prelate's heart, which revealed an ominous irregularity in its functions, demonstrated by his labored breathing. Accordingly he had given to all the members of the household, Guido included, the severest orders: Monsignore should exert himself as little as possible, especially talking, and, above all, he must not be subjected to emotions of any kind. That evening, when he found his uncle sweetly sleeping, Guido, of course, never thought of waking him, but, leaving the faithful Don Paolino on guard, had hurried immediately up to the Villa Meroni.

Monsignore's conduct during the riot had made an indelible impression upon the young officer's heart; he saw the old prelate as if irradiated by a double halo of heroism; a mere boy, he had won



the Star of "The Thousand"; old and delicate, to prevent an impending fratricidal strife, he had thrown himself almost in the very jaws of death. So he poured out to Delia the vivid description of all that had happened, and confided to her the history of his uncle's past life, knowing that no one could appreciate its pathetic nobility more than herself. Delia, who had never forgotten the impression made upon her by Monsignore, and felt her heart going out to the much stricken man, was moved to her innermost soul, and exclaimed: "And he a priest! Oh, the pity of it! If I could only go to him to nurse him and soothe him . . . for, believe me, Guido, those black-hearted wretches are doing their best to kill that brave soul!"

The next morning when Monsignore awoke after a good night's rest, the first thing he asked of Don Paolino was whether Guido was there, as he wished to see him immediately. The request, not to say the order, was so natural and at the same time so imperative that Don Paolino could but call the young officer from the next room, not omitting, however, to impress upon both of them the severe orders imparted by Dr. Sandri, who, he said, would make him responsible for whatever happened. But Monsignore was not



going to allow any doctor to interfere with his firm resolution to have his beloved "boy" all to himself after their estrangement; he was hungering for an intimate talk with him, so that all the caution preached by Don Paolino was of no avail, and the good secretary was compelled to leave the two alone.

Uncle and nephew met now under very different conditions; Guido was no more the easy-going, immature lad of former days, and Monsignore had looked deeply and poignantly into the problems of life; and if, as yet, he had not modified his opinions, he had acquired an hitherto unattained broadness of view, and his mind was beginning to rise above the narrow tenets of dogma. Guido first expressed with deep emotion the tumult of his feelings on the preceding day, when he had unexpectedly seen Monsignore rise as if from the earth before his galloping charger, and Monsignore detailed briefly, but with admirable clearness, what had occurred since their parting. He told of the Synod, of the treachery of Cardinal Baraldi, of the hatred of Conte Meravigli, of Rome's silence concerning his book, and, above all, of his bitter disappointment at the peasants' conduct. But of his visit to Delia, and of the novel train of thought awakened by this visit, he said nothing;



he did not, on the contrary, hesitate to touch upon his nephew's engagement:

"Now, Guido, there is something that as a priest and a gentleman I feel compelled to acknowledge to you at once. When you told me of your proposed engagement, I grossly misjudged and libelled . . . that young lady! I now beg her pardon . . . and yours——"

The young officer deeply moved, interrupted him: "No, no, uncle! You did not, could not know Delia!"

It was Monsignore now who interrupted: "Donna Delia Leoni deserves all respect and admiration, I am now fully aware, but, unfortunately, the fact of her divorce remains, and on account of it it is impossible for me to countenance your union with her. This hurts me to the quick, believe me, Guido, but how could it be otherwise?"

For a while Guido remained silent, then very earnestly he said: "Uncle, I think that now I can understand your motives and your point of view better than I did before. You consider certain ties unbreakable, even though they be in contradiction to honesty, morality, and self-respect, just because a certain formula has been pronounced, but, in spite of this, allow me to ask you one



question: If Delia had not been a victim of ignorance and greed, would you not fully endorse my choice?"

At this direct question Monsignore winced: he saw vividly before him Delia's spiritual and lovely face, and heard her measured voice repeat, "Those whom God hath joined together, no man *can* set asunder." But he did not attempt to evade the question: "Yes, she is all that I should wish your wife to be, but how can I, a priest and a Bishop, approve of a union in direct opposition to the laws of my Church, a union that cannot be hallowed by its holy rites, which give to the union of the sexes sacramental value and importance? I now ask you that question!"

"Again I see, uncle, and understand," Guido answered with deep feeling but profound deference; "but are you quite justified in holding that such unions as ours are in direct opposition to the laws of the Church, when we have examples without number of sacramental ties loosened by the Church itself for all kinds of reasons, even the most futile, but generally because much gold was forthcoming? Is not the union of the sexes made sacred and indissoluble exclusively by pure and absolute love?"

A look of deep agony obscured for an instant



Monsignore's eyes; he rested his head wearily back upon the high pillows behind him, and a shiver ran through his delicate frame. Guido came forward in the greatest concern, accusing himself of selfish thoughtlessness and lack of consideration. But serenely the old gentleman waved him back to his seat; those words had reawakened the secret battle of his innermost soul, and reopened the bleeding wound of his loveless past. He murmured to himself, in a tone so low and tender that Guido could not catch the words, "Love, perfect love, casteth out all fear!" He turned to his "boy," and thoughtfully, with a novel timidity, he said:

"Well, my child, God alone knows who is in the right. We poor atoms can only grope and seek the light the best we can. But I must abide by my law; you, no doubt, will follow your light. I can no longer force my conscience upon yours. I cannot dispute your right to marry Delia Leoni, but promise me one thing: before the civil ceremony is fixed, you will let me know of it yourself. In the meanwhile, and for as long as I live, you will ever be my own beloved child, as you have always been. Now I wish to rest alone . . . and not be disturbed by any one—not even by Paolino. God bless and prosper you, my own dearest boy!"



Guido gladly gave the required promise. He had perceived the strange modification in Monsignore's opinions, but could not explain it, though feeling that the wall between them had been somehow removed. The young officer bent down to kiss his uncle's diaphanous hand and went softly to the door. He had just reached it when Monsignore suddenly beckoned him back near the bed, and, making him stoop, whispered: "And . . . tell her not to think too harshly of me . . . that I send her an old man's, not a Bishop's, blessing." Guido would have told his uncle of the emotion which he experienced at those wholly unexpected words, but, with a momentary revival of his old manner, Monsignore put his finger to his lips, intimating silence, and so the young man left the room.

Guido's stay at Corgeno was necessarily very short, his military duties during these still unsettled moments making his presence in Varese indispensable. When Dr. Sandri came for his morning visit, the young officer told him that, in spite of orders, he had just had a long conversation with the patient. The doctor chided him severely, telling him that Monsignore's heart was in no condition to stand emotions of any kind, for, though there was nothing yet organically wrong,



his abnormally nervous temperament rendered an attack of angina pectoris possible at any moment. Guido, much frightened and concerned, then gave particulars of the morning's interview, with the result that Sandri was mollified, and warmly congratulated the young man, adding that such a decision ought to have been a first-rate tonic for Monsignore, and that the boy, though a soldier, was no fool.

Don Paolino who was present at the conversation, hearing from the "boy's" mouth the almost incredible fact that Monsignore's own nephew was engaged to marry one whom in his priestly intransigence he had surnamed "that huzzy of the Villa Meroni," and the other fact, still more incredible, that Monsignore would no longer oppose this marriage, made such a wry and puzzled face and pursed up his big mouth so comically that, in spite of their preoccupations, Sandri and Guido had to burst out laughing, and the former cryptically remarked that "lazy, good-for-nothing priests had better prepare to find themselves left out in the cold, where they belonged!"

After leaving his uncle's house, promising to return as soon as possible, Guido ran up to say good-bye to Delia. He repeated to her the conversation he had just had with Monsignore, he



told her of the serious condition of the old gentleman's health, of his many troubles with Rome, and above all, his words about their marriage and his message to her. The blessing and the form in which he had worded it deeply moved the young woman; her quick feminine intuition told her the painful process of thought by which Monsignore had modified his views, and she was at the same time proud and grieved at having been capable of disturbing the conscience of such a man. She longed to soothe his fevered brow and stroke those silver curls which had been bowed in confusion before her, and as she said this to Guido he could not help betraying a little jealousy of the tenderness she evinced for Monsignore. She chided him sweetly for it, adding: "Of course I love him dearly, boy, and I love him because I see you in him, and because I see him in you . . . both transparent, simple, faithful souls, so rare and precious, but, boy, it is bitter to think of him lonely and sad and not to be able to go to him on account of that wicked barrier which stands between him and us!"

Notwithstanding the most intelligent and devoted ministrations of Dr. Sandri and Don Pao-lino's untiring cares by night and day, Monsignore's health, if it improved at all, progressed only in a



distressingly slow fashion. For any trivial cause, a door slamming, a sudden gust of wind, or even without any appreciable reason, his heart fluttered in the most alarming manner; at the slightest exertion, such as bending down to pick up a book or getting in and out of bed, his lips became bluish, a short but dry and distressing cough racked his delicate frame, and his forehead became clammy with perspiration. Resolutely Dr. Sandri insisted that his patient must see absolutely no one, giving such peremptory orders that, even when the Prefetto himself came "to present to his Excellency the thanks of the Government for his heroic intervention in the riots of Varese," he was told by Don Paolino that Monsignore's state of health was such that it was impossible to see him. Cerberus himself could not have been a more efficient guard than the good secretary, whose vigilance was untiring. Letters and newspapers were also kept from the patient—that is, as much as possible, for it would have been obviously even worse if Monsignore had been allowed to fret about his mail. He was accordingly allowed to see the many expressions of admiration elicited in the press by his conduct and the letters from all parts of the world complimenting him upon his great book.



In the meanwhile Monsignore's manner and temper had undergone a great and remarkable transformation; much of his old activity had flickered out, as well as the sudden and irresistible outbursts of the historic "Villarosa temper." He seemed content to remain for hours at a stretch in his huge arm-chair, propped up by pillows, gazing upon the lovely panorama of the lake and hills. He had become so pathetically docile to the orders of the doctor that Sandri began to grow uneasy about it, and from time to time attempted, but without result, to arouse in him the old polemical spirit. The one trait of his character which was not only unchanged but had developed to a surprising extent was his fearless innocence, the sweetness of his manners, and the profound gratitude with which he acknowledged even the most trivial attention from any one. Don Paulino could not witness this without feeling a big lump rising in his throat, and he gave vent to his emotion by fierce grunts which always called a quaint and whimsical smile on to his master's lips.

But during the long, silent hours of his enforced repose, although no one suspected it, Monsignore's mind was unceasingly at work. It seemed to have acquired a preternatural acuity of perception, a sublimation of its logical qualities, and a



strange aloofness from the narrow motives which hamper poor human nature; all resentment had been swept away by an all-understanding, all-pardoning charity, which gave him at least the peace "that passeth all understanding." One great struggle alone had not ceased in his conscience—the conflict between the prejudiced interpretation of the Divine law, as evolved by man, and its perfect, universal, and eternal meaning as conceived by the Divinity itself. A stupendous problem this, well worthy of the great, pure heart which was facing it unflinchingly, but one that no human being can attempt to solve without perilously straining the impalpable threads which bind the soul to the body. And that was why Dr. Sandri's remedies and devoted care did not act as he thought they must.

One morning, as usual, Don Paolino carefully examined the letters just arrived in order to set aside those which, in his judgment, might unduly excite Monsignore, but as he dared not open them, this operation was necessarily a very haphazard affair, and so one letter slipped in which the ever vigilant Cerberus, if he had only known, would have remorselessly destroyed. As is so often the case with highly nervous temperaments, Monsignore, upon that particular morning, not only



looked but really felt so much better that Sandri at his early visit rubbed his hands in high glee, and curtly remarked to his patient: "Out of the wood now. Good food, plenty of air, that's all you want. But no more of your pranks. No, sir!" So Don Paolino saw no difficulty in allowing his master the pleasure of opening his mail himself. After perusing Guido's daily letter and a few others of no importance, Monsignore picked up what turned out to be the snake in the grass, casually remarking that he had never seen that writing before. Rapidly glancing at the signature, Villarosa looked at first puzzled, then concerned, but said nothing, and read it as if weighing each word. A long silence ensued. Monsignore, with a slight flush on his face which heightened his appearance of good health, placed the letter face downwards upon his lap, and gazed intently out upon the landscape for a while. Then he re-read the letter from beginning to end very carefully, but without any visible indication of feeling which Don Paolino could construe in any way. With a smooth, even voice he suddenly spoke:

"Dr. Sandri said that I must have plenty of air; you heard him, did you not? The winter is pretty cold and snowy in our parts, and I fail to see how I will be able to go out much in the



prevailing bad weather. So, my Paolino, what would you say to a trip to Rome?" The good secretary gasped in undisguised amazement; he was so thoroughly unprepared for such a sortie on the part of Monsignore, who proverbially hated travelling, that he did not find a word to reply. Monsignore went on volubly: "Don't forget that my visit *ad limina* is about due, so that we could combine business, health, and pleasure. Would it not be delightful . . . and you, my Paolino, who have never seen the thousand wonders of the Eternal City!" And a short, mirthless laugh escaped the old man—a laugh sounding so much like a sob that Don Paolino shuddered without knowing exactly why.

During the whole day Monsignore moved about so easily and looked in such excellent health that it amounted almost to a resurrection, and so Dr. Sandri, completely hoodwinked, not only approved but warmly encouraged a prompt execution of this plan.

What were the contents of this letter which had finally decided Monsignore to undertake the journey to Rome? Nothing could have been more serious, as the personality of the writer and the contents of the letter were symptomatic in the extreme. Father Beerikx, S.J., an Examiner



of the Holy Congregation of the Index and one of those mysterious and obscure individuals who though officially in subordinate positions are effectively the rulers of the Roman Curia, had "taken the liberty," as he wrote, of addressing Monsignore, though unknown to him, moved by his profound respect for his sainted life and his unbounded admiration for his genius. He did so, infringing the strict law of secrecy to which he, a mere amanuensis, was bound; but the motives of his act would, he hoped, fully justify and excuse it. He then proceeded to relate that he had been unworthily chosen to collate the copious notes made upon the first volume of *The Symbolism of the Fourth Gospel* by the Cardinals unofficially delegated to examine the same, and that he was deeply grieved to reveal to him that their Eminences had pointed out many "propositions" in contradiction to the Canons of the faith, thus rendering not only an approbation unthinkable but a condemnation quite possible. He hastened to add that, personally, he had no fault to find, intimating that the Cardinals might have been over-censorious, and that, of course, no definite judgment had, or could have, been pronounced, as the Holy Congregation had not even as yet taken official cognisance of the book, and would



pronounce itself in due time, with the final confirmation by his Holiness. With profuse apologies and circumlocutions, he set forth that his respect and admiration for Monsignore gave him the courage to advise an immediate and serious consideration of the matter and not to hide from him that the withdrawal from circulation of this dangerous first volume and the non-publication of the remaining two by his Excellency's private initiative would demonstrate in as great a man as he was a glorious self-sacrifice and a most dutiful submission to the paramount authority of the Church, insuring thus for himself the highest honors, of which, in truth, no one was more worthy.

It was true that Monsignor Villarosa had only an extremely vague and shadowy knowledge of the hidden mainsprings operating the intricate and cumbersome machinery of the Roman Curia, and that, by force of habit and training, he nourished a dutiful, if somewhat perfunctory, consideration for the decisions of the great ruling congregations of the Church; but in this, his own personal case, it was but human that he should resent accusations of which no one more than himself could fathom the groundlessness and futility. Then the recent discovery of the tortuous and deceitful methods employed by Cardinal Baraldi



had shaken to its very foundations his faith in those above him, the more so that, being a Lombard himself, he estimated correctly the character of Cardinal Bredana, the Vice-Prefect of the Congregation of the Index, whose intimacy with Meravigli was no secret, and he recognised the part he must have played in the Synod affair. But, more than anything else, it was that strange acuity of perception which he seemed to have mysteriously acquired, which made clear to him that it was not so much against his religious convictions that war had been declared, but against the man himself, against his past, unforgotten and unforgiven, against his present actions, by which he had dared to assail the vested interests of those who were the supporters and financiers of the Vatican. If they succeeded in annulling his moral value and his intellectual personality, without exposing themselves to the perils of open warfare, if, by all the subtle means in their power, they could obtain the result of making him appear a self-confessed turncoat and coward, they need not fear him or his influence any longer, for he would have irretrievably stultified his own efforts.

But not for one second did the thought of obtaining in this manner peace and, perhaps, the disdainful guerdon of undesired honors penetrate



Monsignore's great soul; never, at any time, was cowardice possible to him, and at the present moment, above all, steeled by his fight with the angel, as Jacob, he could not even conceive a surrender of his highest ideals. He was perfectly aware that he was going to face tremendous odds, that he was fighting against an overwhelming coalition of interest, reinforced by all the might of secular ignorance, deceit, and corruption; but he obstinately nourished one great hope, that of setting his case before the Sovereign Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ upon earth, who would not, who could not, as the others, be blinded by earthly considerations, and who must, through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, pass judgment according to the eternal law of God. With this conviction profoundly rooted in his heart, Monsignore, as soon as the recondite meaning of Father Beerikx's letter became clear to him, decided irrevocably to visit Rome at once, and for the first and only time in his life used a stratagem to obtain easily what he wished, well aware that had he blurted out his intimate motives, as he always had done, Dr. Sandri and Don Paolino would effectually block his plans and the journey become probably an impossibility.

Two days after this decision, and when the



preparations for the journey were well under way, Monsignore received indirectly the news that the Pope was about to approve and ratify the petition of the Synod of Milan. Don Davide Capelletti came to call upon him, accompanied by Don Sisto Prina, and as Monsignore was keeping up most wonderfully his appearance of good health they were allowed to see him. Both had for some time kept prudently out of the way, their rat-like instinct telling them that there was nothing more to win, and, maybe, very much to lose by sticking to the Bishop's now very leaking barque; Monsignore's illness and the doctor's orders offered an excellent excuse for their absence, so they were not very ill at ease when they were ushered into the library. Monsignore received them quite cordially; if he nourished any resentment for their wavering conduct, he did not show it; the fact was that the puny shortcomings of humanity had ceased to be of any interest or annoyance to him.

After the usual compliments, they told their story. The Curato of Comabbio had a brother who was a member of Cardinal Bredana's household in Rome, and he had advised the Curato, a rather prominent partisan of the Peasants' Leagues that he had better be very careful, as the Cardinal had persuaded the Pope to endorse fully the



Synod's condemnation of the clergy's action in the agrarian agitation. The real reason of Prina and Capelletti's visit was to substantiate their suspicion that Monsignore had protested against it; but they were anxious to know the manner of this protest, to whom it had been directed, and what steps had been taken to procure in the Vatican itself a strong support for it; this information would tell them how to shape their subsequent conduct. Monsignore listened with apparent unconcern to their tale, and gave no outward sign of his true feelings; in his heart he must have known that all they said was correct and most threatening, but, faithful to the last, his unshakable trust in the wisdom and justice of the Vicar of Christ gave him a cheerful courage. He smiled upon the two priests and replied:

"My dear friends, do not be anxious in the least about the tittle-tattle of underlings; neither Cardinal Bredana nor any one else can persuade his Holiness to set himself in contradiction with truth. His Holiness has in his hands the whole facts of the case; I myself have furnished him a faithful and complete narrative of all that has taken place. This is more than sufficient, and it is almost sinful to believe that the Supreme Pontiff will allow any one to influence him against right



and justice. It is an aspersion upon his high intelligence and rectitude! Depart, therefore, in peace, my dear friends, with my blessing, continue staunch and true in your noble mission, and God will protect His own!"

So the two left the villa, but when they got out of eye and earshot that wily fox Don Sisto shrewdly remarked to Don Davide: "Friend Davide, the old man's faculties must have deplorably weakened if he believes that the Pope is going to listen to him all alone! All I have to say is that we had better look out for ourselves; the game is up!" To this sentiment Don Davide gave unqualified acquiescence.

This visit confirmed still more, if it had been required, Monsignore's strong conviction that an immediate journey to Rome had become imperative. There was no longer any possible doubt; his divination of the intimate connection between his social activity and the reception of his book was correct; the same hostile powers were at work, and he realised with startling clearness that at the bottom of it all lurked the hatred, patient because eternal, *patiens quia æternus*, of the true rulers of the Church against the priest who wished to remain at the same time a patriot, and combine in one great ideal his devotion to the greatness



and unity of Italy and to the pure majesty of his faith. It was inexpressibly torturing to him to discover how the great object of his entire life was nothing else but an empty and impossible dream. Be it as it may, he would stand up for it to the last, and die, if needs be, buried in the folds of his glorious banner.

With feverish energy he pushed rapidly on the preparations for his journey; coldly and collectedly he informed Arciprete Sidoli of his decision, merely explaining that his visit *ad limina Petri* could no longer be delayed. Sidoli was so thoroughly taken aback that he could not help insinuating that Monsignore must have far more weighty reasons for such an unexpected and sudden decision, an impertinence this which evoked one of the last flashes of the "Villarosa temper." "Ask your friend Conte Meravigli; he will inform you of my other reasons if you do not know them!" Monsignore thundered as he haughtily turned his back upon his enemy.

It had been impossible for the young officer to return even once to Casbenno, for the troops had been kept on the move throughout the province as a matter of precaution, and accordingly no furloughs were granted. When Monsignore decided to visit Rome, first Don Paolino and then



his uncle himself had informed him of the fact, and Guido, mindful of Dr. Sandri's warnings, was not a little disturbed by the news. He accordingly wrote to the doctor requesting his views about the possibility of such an undertaking, and, to his surprise and relief, received the reply that as the symptoms which had so frightened them all had suddenly disappeared, as was often the case with nervous temperaments, the writer thought that, far from harming his patient, a visit to a southern climate would be highly advisable, especially because he could remain there much in the open—good air being the one great remedy for him.

Guido accordingly did all in his power to make his uncle's journey comfortable and pleasant, engaged for him a specially reserved compartment, and made arrangements in Rome for adequate and convenient rooms; though not at all versed in the habits of prelates visiting the Eternal City, he secured a cosy suite in a very select and fashionable family hotel overlooking the Villa Borghese, realising that a huge and noisy caravansary was no fit place for a Bishop of retiring disposition and just out of a sick-room. So on the day fixed for the journey Guido met his uncle at his arrival from Varese in the Milan station,



dined with him, and left him only when the Rome express steamed off, after supervising the last particulars for his welfare. Never, apparently, had Monsignore been in better spirits; he was extremely thin, it is true, and of a strange diaphanous pallor, intermittently suffused by fugitive flashes of color, but his voice was strong and even and his movements as elastic and free as ever.

After a pleasant and uneventful journey, Monsignore and Don Paolino arrived in the capital. Rome was almost new to Villarosa, his last visit to that city dating almost thirty years back. It was with a peculiar feeling of pride and pleasure that he gazed upon the broad new streets, the fine buildings, the busy throng, so wonderfully different from the squalor, silence, and neglect which had made the papal Rome he knew look like some small provincial town fast falling into decay and oblivion. In that lovely morning of December, the sun just over the horizon shed a glory of color over the towers and pinnacles of the City of Dreams, and the huge dome of St. Peter's glistened dazzlingly as a colossal jewel set in a vast diadem of gold. As Monsignore looked up in wonder and admiration his eyes were attracted above and beyond the Basilica to the summit of



a beautiful hill, all trees and verdure, upon which the bold outline of a great equestrian statue was sharply silhouetted by the horizontal rays of the sun; immediately he recognised Garibaldi, standing on guard, impassible and serene, over the great city at his feet. Instinctively, as it were, his hand flew to the bronze star, hidden against the cruel scar on his breast, then up to his *tricornio* in military salute. The rapidly moving carriage soon cut off the view, and in a few minutes landed them at their hotel, where they were received with the greatest attention and made at once perfectly at home.

Before leaving Casbenno, Monsignore had very carefully planned his movements: he must pay first the so-called "obligatory" visits, the *visite d'obbligo* of ecclesiastical etiquette, and then obtain the formal audience at the Vatican for the official visit *ad limina Petri*. During this time he would, of course, lose no opportunity of advocating the causes he came to champion, so that his Holiness might be prepared by the knowledge of his arrival and ready to take up the solution of weighty problems which must be so near to the heart of the Vicar of Christ; but he counted, above all, upon his historical right as a Bishop, a right which in his guileless simplicity he firmly



retained as inalienable, to visit his Holiness at any time and without passing through the mazes of an intricate ceremonial. That the representative of Christ upon earth should be hedged in from any direct communications with his own immediate subordinates by far more obstacles than the Grand Lama of Thibet never entered his mind, and so next day, cheerful and full of hope, he set out to begin his visits.

First of all, however, he drove to the Church of San Carlo al Corso, a sort of unofficial headquarters for all Lombard ecclesiastics. This was the "titular" church of Cardinal Baraldi, much to Monsignore's annoyance, as, no doubt, the officials there might be prepared for his visit, and with that petty but persistent malignity of which ecclesiastics are past masters set all kinds of impediments in his way. Much to Monsignore's surprise, everything was excessively pleasant: the Prevosto received him with all the honors due to his rank, immediately offered him the choice of altars and hours for his daily Mass, a compliment also extended to good Don Paolino, extremely out of ease in the gaudy church, and placed himself at the orders of Monsignore for anything he would need.

After this part of his duties had been satisfacto-



rily arranged a very bitter morsel was in store for Monsignore; the first in his list of visits must be that to Cardinal Bredana, as the Vice-Prefetto of the Holy Congregation of the Index, and the only Lombard Cardinal in the Curia. Cardinal Everardo Bredana, of the Princes of Montigliolo and Roccabbia, was notorious all over Italy for his mad hatred of the new order of things, his dark and continuous plottings against Italy abroad, and the questionable morality of his private life. His persecution of the Marchese Renato Rinaldi, a young, virtuous, and highly gifted priest and his own nephew, who had finally unfrocked himself for conscientious reasons, had become a public scandal, and no Lombard could forget the revelations of the famous "Rinaldi Case," fought out before the courts, when the Cardinal had attempted to defraud the young Marchese of his father's large fortune. Monsignore, who had known the Rinaldis well, as they possessed a country seat and estate in the neighborhood of Corgeno, though not sympathising with the philosophical ideas nor with the decisive schism of Renato, looked upon Bredana with unalloyed disgust and contempt. Furthermore, Villarosa knew of the Cardinal's intimacy with Meravigli, guessed that he must have mani-



pulated the petition of the Synod, and was probably also the leader of the violent opposition in the Congregation of the Index against his book. But at the same time Cardinal Bredana was reputed to be all-powerful at the Vatican, and so Monsignore had no alternative but to go.

At Palazzo Bredana he was superciliously informed by an imposing *guarda-portone* that his Eminence was at home, and, leaving Don Paolino to wait for him in the carriage, he toiled up the imposing stairs, stopping every little while, as he was alone, to still the quick and painful throbbing of his heart. The liveried flunkeys lolling about in the hall straightened up at once in the presence of an unmistakable *grand-seigneur*, and Monsignore, after handing his card and waiting a short while in a magnificent drawing-room, of which the Cardinal's draped throne was the most conspicuous piece of furniture, was ushered into a private study. Tall and powerfully built, Bredana towered above Villarosa's delicate frame as he stood up stiffly to receive his visitor. No greater contrast could have been imagined than that existing between the two men confronting each other: the one hard, wilful, and sensual-looking; the other with his spiritual, trusting, and lovable expression. Immediately their glances



clashed and gripped each other, but no sign of the duel was to be seen upon the surface. They exchanged a curt and formal greeting, but did not shake hands, as it was proscribed by strict etiquette.

Monsignore, after explaining that he had come to Rome in order to pay his visit *ad limina*, announced that he had presented his formal demand for the ceremonial visit, and requested the Cardinal to use his influence in favor of a prompt reception, being most anxious to return to his diocese. The Cardinal looked preternaturally grave, and shook his head in no encouraging fashion; his Holiness was far from well, weakened and much incommoded by the gout, due, no doubt, to the enforced confinement in the Vatican of a man who had taken a great deal of exercise all his life, and the doctors, unanimously, had recommended the most scrupulous observance of their orders, which included the reduction to the minimum of all visits, excitement, or work. On account of this regrettable fact, one more crime upon the conscience of the vile despoilers of the Holy See's independence, many Bishops, whose names he glibly quoted, from all parts of the world had been compelled to depart without the great consolation of seeing his Holiness, or had deferred



their visits to more propitious moments, so he would do his best, but could promise nothing. Monsignore, seeing clearly the drift of the Cardinal's long discourse, and knowing full well that his enemy would throw all possible obstacles in his way, at once dropped the subject.

Pluckily, Monsignore then spoke about the examination of *The Symbolism of the Fourth Gospel* by the Congregation of the Index, saying that he had come to request from his Eminence, as Vice-Prefetto of the same, some information about the decision to be taken about it; but, in spite of all his efforts, he could not draw out his adversary; the Cardinal, studiously and with subtle insolence, entrenched himself in the plea that Monsignore's book was not yet officially before the Congregation, and that, as to himself, he had not read the work, as his many serious and absorbing duties prevented him from indulging in the mere reading of books—a thrust which Villarosa countered by acquiescing that of course his Eminence was not expected to do so. Bredana winced visibly, as his ignorance on such subjects was a well-known and very sore point; so he at once retaliated by asking how the crazy peasants of the Varesotto were progressing, and if the clergy had not yet come to their senses. “If



they have not," he threateningly went on, "we will see about it, Monsignore, for I can tell you that his Holiness is perfectly indignant! Short shrift will be allowed to the transgressors of the final decisions of the Church!" And with these words he rose to dismiss his visitor, as was his privilege.

Monsignore rose likewise, and, looking his adversary intrepidly in the eyes, replied: "So be it, your Eminence; short shrift to the transgressors! But who are these transgressors? Those who uphold the rich and the powerful, or those who, following Christ, stand for the poor and oppressed?" And, not waiting for an answer, he walked proudly out of the room.

When Monsignore got back into the carriage, where Don Paolino was anxiously awaiting him, he shook himself all over, as if wishing to get rid of the noisome traces left by his contact with such a man. To Don Paolino he exclaimed almost gaily: "No more work to-day . . . fortunately! I almost suffocated in Cardinal Bredana's study. I need now pure, undefiled air." Then, turning to the coachman, he ordered: "Drive us up to the Gianicolo by the shortest way. Stop at the foot of Garibaldi's statue. There I will breathe. The air is pure up there."



## CHAPTER XI

### VANQUISHED BUT NOT COWED

FOR more than a fortnight after his interview with Cardinal Bredana, Monsignore continued with unwearying method and patience his laborious round of visits, undeterred by the gradually increasing coolness of the personages upon whom he called. No one better than himself, on account of his abnormally developed faculties, could detect the thinly veiled hostility of some and the frightened reserve of others, and he understood that, for some occult reason, every one belonging to the Vatican fought shy of him. He was evidently considered a highly dangerous person, and accordingly left severely alone.

Villarosa only found one exception, but a very notable one: a man of world-wide reputation, of impeccable life, a prelate who had occupied the most exalted positions in the Curia, and who had come very near being elected Pope at the last Conclave, the Cardinal Mistretta di Santa Rosalia.



The proud Sicilian nobleman kept at that moment absolutely aloof from the Vatican in a contemptuous retirement, and as he was mortally hated and feared by the *camerilla* ruling the Curia, his influence would have been more damaging than helpful for Monsignore, who called upon him less as a duty than as a genuine demonstration of respect. Though not sympathising in any way with the Bishop of Varese, in his social, political, or philosophical ideals, Cardinal Mistretta had the greatest respect for the man and the thinker, both of whom he could thoroughly appreciate. His reception of him, however, cordial and deferential as it was, persuaded Monsignore more effectively than all other symptoms that the cause he was supporting was a desperate one, and that his one hope could lie only in a direct and personal appeal to the Pope. Cardinal Mistretta was perfectly frank with Monsignore, told him that they must agree to disagree on the subjects he had come to moot, although he recognised their vital importance, but concerning an appeal to the Pope alone the experienced statesman shrugged his shoulders and replied:

“His Holiness may be willing to listen to you—if you can get to see him; but, believe me, my good Monsignore, they will never allow you to



come near enough—never. Follow my advice: I love and admire you, Villarosa, and only wish we had a few more priests like you, but, just because of this, you are going to come out of this conflict battered and bruised, a broken man—that is, if you manage to survive. So give up the attempt, go back to your beautiful lakes and mountains. Go, publish and preach no more. Have yourself forgotten, if you can; your peace and may be your life are at that price.”

Greatly touched, and not a little struck by the similitude of the advice given him by two such dissimilar men as Cardinal Mistretta and Don Paolino, Monsignore warmly thanked his host, but, urged on by that intense flame of voluntary self-sacrifice which blazed within him, he unflinchingly replied: “May God bless your Eminence for the kindness and friendliness shown to me, which I shall never forget, but my path has been marked out by our Master who is in heaven, and what else can I do but struggle on towards that goal He has pointed out to me? In Him alone I trust, and into His hands have I committed my soul! The rest does not count.”

And so Villarosa left, much more saddened and downhearted than after his exciting encounters with enemies and cowards, while the Cardinal



grumbled to himself: "A saint—that man is a saint! but nowadays the Vatican is the last place in the world for saints."

It was immediately after this interview with Cardinal Mistretta that Don Paolino began to detect an alarming yet almost imperceptible change for the worse in Monsignore's hitherto apparently excellent condition of health and spirits. This manifested itself by a subdued but feverish impatience to hurry in whatever he was doing, as if in doubt whether there was time enough before him to accomplish his task, and, occasionally, by unaccountable short and sudden gasps for breath. In spite of Monsignore's voluble assertions that he felt perfectly well, faithful Don Paolino plied him with the medicines that Sandri had furnished, but could not overcome the old gentleman's repugnance for food of any kind. However, Monsignore, far from abandoning his plan of seeing the Pope privately, so that he might speak freely and unconstrainedly with him, set to work with an energy as admirable and pathetic as it was futile. It became an obsession with him, almost a monomania, which pervaded and absorbed his brilliant faculties to such an extent that he could hardly see and understand anything else, and precluded the possi-



bility of detecting how cruelly he was being duped.

Monsignore did not count upon his official request for the ceremonial audience *de rigueur*, knowing that it would pass, with slow and majestic deliberation, from one official to the other, and would be exposed to all possible delays by Bre-dana's powerful opposition, but he centred all his endeavors in the effort of presenting himself unheralded before his Holiness, according to the historical right of Bishops. So, day after day he frequented the Vatican at all hours, flitting from one ante-room to the other, demanding and begging, in turn, from subordinate officials to have access to his Holiness: the officials were all extremely courteous, some even quite friendly, but all had most plausible and unanswerable reasons to explain how his otherwise wholly legitimate request could not possibly be granted that day, and poor Monsignore could never go farther than the ante-room. Once only, a young *Cameriere Segreto*, either moved by the deep pathos of that figure or, maybe, for mysterious reasons of his own, smuggled Villarosa into a windowless little room adjoining the Pope's private study. From there Monsignore heard his Holiness petulantly exclaim, in the broadest Venetian dialect, "Not



those slippers, Toni! Give me the old ones"; then something untoward must have happened, for the *Cameriere* pounced upon Monsignore and dragged him bodily away. That was the nearest he ever got to the Vicar of Christ.

Time dragged on. In the restricted, malicious, and gossiping world of the Vatican, Monsignor Villarosa soon became a well-known personality and almost a joke. Irreverent young denizens of that peculiar world nicknamed him the "Crazy Bishop," and more than once a clerical wag sent the old man flying to some out-of-the-way corner of the Vatican by imaginary indications of where the Pope might be found alone. Unfortunately Don Paolino never accompanied Monsignore to the Vatican; if he had, the shrewd fellow would have opened his master's eyes much sooner, so that when the inevitable crash occurred, it was fully unexpected.

Cardinal Bredana had not rested one unnecessary moment; the Papal approbation to the Synod of Milan's petition was given and embodied in a Rescript to the Cardinal, Archbishop of Milan, much more virulent than the petition itself. After the usual lamentations over the woes of his "imprisonment," the Pope branded the irreligion and irreverence of the present rulers of



Italy, worthy successors of the wicked men who had destroyed the old order of things established by God himself. "But," it went on to say, "these wicked men have craftily penetrated even into the bosom of the Church itself, defiling it by their presence, and have sown their infamous seed especially in thy archdiocese, my Reverend Brother, so that many of the clergy have been induced in good faith, under the pretence of charity and love for the poor, to uphold wicked and malicious schemes, designed by the Evil One to undermine the Holy Foundations of Our Church. We have more especially in mind the so-called agrarian agitation, which thou and thy Reverend Brothers of the Lombard episcopate have so masterfully denounced. We condemn it as ungodly and sinful because of its shameless attacks against the rightful owners of the soil, and the destruction by it of that meekness, humility, and poverty which must ever be the crowning virtues of the toilers if they wish to obtain one day the eternal glory of heaven. Our clergy are therefore commanded hereby, under the sanction of the gravest canonical punishments, to labor with all their strength against such malignant principles, thus once more solemnly reaffirming their devotion and obedience to Our paternal orders."



This Rescript, carried by special messenger, was by the formal order of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan immediately read at Mass in all the churches of the archdiocese, Varese of course included, where Sidoli took the fiendish pleasure of not delaying one hour. Monsignor Villarosa was kept thoroughly in the dark about the whole procedure, and was only informed of the fact by the Roman newspapers. They quoted a triumphant article from the chief organ of the Lombard landlords, rendering unstinted praise to "this wise and far-reaching" document, as it called the Rescript, published *in extenso*.

Any other man would have sunk under the blow; Villarosa faced it with true Spartan heroism, but the shaft had touched him in a vital spot, and it was only by dint of will-power that he did not faint, for his heart felt as if crushed by a frozen grip, and for a while he could not breathe. Don Paolino, shaking in his shoes, uttered inarticulate oaths and objurgations and reminders to his master; but with fearful energy Monsignore silenced him, rushed blindly downstairs, followed this time by his distracted secretary, and jumping into his carriage, ordered the coachman to drive full speed to the Vatican; there he flew up the stairs so rapidly that Don Paolino could not follow



him, and in the Segreteria Pontificia demanded in so terrible a tone an immediate reply to his request for an audience *ad limina*, that the official in charge, terrified by the apparition of that avenging spectre, completely lost his head and returned to the Bishop his letter of request, crossed in red pencil by these words in the Pope's own handwriting: "*Da non riceversi*" ("Not to be received"). Slowly, not uttering another word, with a rigid, automatic step, Villarosa left the Cancelleria, still grasping the letter in his clenched fist, and got back into the carriage; there in the arms of Don Paolino he was stricken by a first attack of angina pectoris and fell into a dead faint.

At the hotel a doctor, hastily summoned, managed to restore Monsignore to consciousness; as the heart was fluttering in a most alarming fashion, he administered an injection of nitroglycerine, which acted so rapidly that the physician almost regretted having used that medicament. As soon as he was able to speak, Monsignore declared that he would not stop one hour longer in Rome, and that, come what might, he must leave immediately for Varese. Neither prayers nor threats nor the tears of Don Paolino had the slightest influence; the attending doctor, fearing the perilous state of agitation into which



the aged prelate was working himself, finally advised Don Paolino to give in, as the journey would be nothing in comparison with the danger they were facing by not humoring him. The distracted secretary secretly wired the news of the attack and of their abrupt return to Guido, Dr. Sandri, and the housekeeper at Casbenno, and was able to have his master safely transported to the railway, and to find, with difficulty places in a crowded carriage of a slow day train.

The weather was abominable and the journey never-ending; the carriage, of the old-fashioned kind, was wretchedly stuffy and close, as the passengers, often changed at intermediate points, strenuously objected to the lowering of any window. Monsignore sat in his corner, bolt upright most of the time, as if fearing that the slightest relaxation of the grip he had taken on himself might mean an utter collapse, while Don Paolino watched narrowly every twitch of his eyelids with an expression on his homely face that was comically pathetic. Neither spoke, except at long intervals, and then in short sentences only: Monsignore could not, the excruciating pain gnawing at his vital springs did not allow it, and Don Paolino was at an utter loss to express the whirl of all the conflicting thoughts which



crowded upon his mind, and felt that a railway-carriage was no place in which to give vent to his indignation.

Night came as they reached Pisa, where they had to wait more than two hours before taking the train for Genoa and Milan. By alternately coaxing and scolding Don Paolino succeeded in forcing Monsignore to drink a glass of milk, in which he surreptitiously had poured some brandy, and when the train started at last he fortunately secured a reserved compartment. The remainder of the journey was thus negotiated in much better conditions, Monsignore at last consenting to lie down, though his labored breathing forced him to be propped up with all the rugs they could spare. But the old gentleman's sleep was even more of a torture to his anxious watcher than the rigid but living tension of Monsignore's nerves during the day; in the dim light of the compartment the emaciated lineaments of that beloved face, with its waxen pallor and closed eyes, gave it a fearful likeness of being stilled for ever in death.

Early in the damp, foggy dawn of a rigid January day the train steamed at last into the station of Milan, and Don Paolino breathed more freely as he saw the well-known faces of Guido and Dr.



Sandri. The meeting was intensely sad and touching, though the young officer, coached by Sandri, and Sandri himself, did their utmost to eliminate any causes which might react upon the shattered nerves of the Bishop. Both men were elaborately unconcerned, as if it was an almost daily occurrence to meet Monsignore returning from Rome, and nothing untoward had happened. Villarosa saw through it all, but wishing to please them, did not even inquire how it was that they knew of his sudden decision to return home. As Guido helped him down from the carriage, the old gentleman rested in his arms a little longer than necessary and whispered brokenly in his ear: "God bless you, my boy! I am vanquished . . . but . . . unshaken!" Then, turning, he greeted Sandri with a melancholy attempt to be jocose, so that the good doctor, in a not very successful effort to hide his emotion at the sight of the havoc wrought upon his patient, growled incomprehensibly and concluded by vociferously berating the porters for their delay in bringing up the Bath chair that had been ordered.

With the obedience of a little child (this being the symptom which gave Sandri the greatest anxiety), Monsignore allowed himself to be wheeled out of the station, and after breakfast, a meal



which the doctor forced down his patient's throat by repeated explosions of wrath, Guido casually told his uncle that he had recently bought a fine limousine, and that he wished to drive him directly to Casbenno in it. Villarosa understood at once that this was simply a move to save him from the gossiping curiosity of the town-folk, and, consenting to be deceived, admired the luxurious automobile, but almost as soon as they were seated he rested his tired head against a pillow and sank into an intermediate state between stupor and sleep.

This gave Sandri the opportunity to question Don Paolino most minutely, and to upbraid him furiously, of course in whispers, for a thoughtless scatterbrain, whose inattention and lack of understanding had rendered this fatal occurrence possible. Poor Don Paolino was, of course, perfectly innocent of all these misdeeds, but for the first time in his life felt so crushed and speechless with care and grief that he had no energy left to defend himself, and took his punishment without an attempt to contradict. In a couple of hours they arrived at Casbenno, and Monsignore was settled in his bed under the most rigorous medical supervision.

But Monsignore would not remain in confine-



ment longer than the few days absolutely necessary to give him the long-needed rest. When Sandri, at his wits' end, for the first time partly disclosed to his patient the truth about his state of health and told him that his heart would not stand much strain of any kind, adding that any imprudence on his part would be little short of suicide, Monsignore sternly but quietly replied: "I am a soldier, Sandri, a soldier of Christ, and a Villarosa. I will obey you in all you say, but I cannot be a coward, remember it. And if I must die a few years sooner, what of it? Why should I live when all my life is crumbling around me? No! far better fall at my post with my battle-flag before my darkening eyes, than drag on the empty shell of my worthless body. I am going to do my duty to the end, Sandri, at all costs; for the rest, God will provide!"

Dr. Sandri reasoned, implored, threatened even to throw up the case. It was all useless, and finally he had to do the best he could in the adverse circumstances. So when Sidoli, as Vicar-General of the diocese, asked for admittance on the plea that he must present at once to his chief a thorough report of what had occurred during his absence, but in reality to gloat over the downfall of an enemy and feast his eyes upon his



humiliation and defeat, Monsignore had him immediately ushered into his library, and, for over an hour, plied him with the minutest and most searching questions about matters of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction. He did not spare him many severe reprimands about lax practices and neglect of duty, to all of which the Arciprete had to submit, boiling inwardly with ill-repressed fury, as Monsignore's manner was as haughty and commanding as ever, and any one ignorant of what had just happened in Rome would not have imagined that his authority had been irretrievably shaken.

But at the end of the interview Sidoli thought that his turn for reprisals had come when he broached the subject of Cardinal Baraldi's circular for the publication of the last Papal Rescript. In a honeyed and perfidious voice he began: "Your Excellency has full knowledge, of course, of the Rescript addressed by his Holiness to the Cardinal-Archbishop, who imparted the necessary orders to all the churches of the archdiocese. Interpreting in this, I am sure, the wishes of your Excellency, I had the honor of reading this magnificent document before the faithful assembled in the cathedral the same day in which it reached me, and next Sunday it will be read by my order from



the pulpit in all the rural parishes of our diocese. Then, entering, I hope, still more deeply into the spirit of the document, I thought it highly advisable to do something better: I have penned, as well as my poor means permit, an address to his Holiness, 'solemnly reaffirming our devotion to his paternal orders,' as the Rescript says, and strongly disavowing any sympathy with the wicked and impious subverters of the holy order of things. This address I have sent to all priests of our diocese to sign, as no doubt they will be more than anxious to do, and, in due time, we shall have it forwarded to Rome and laid at the feet of the Blessed Pontiff. Have I your Excellency's approbation?"

During this long tirade Monsignore did not move even a muscle of his face; whatever his feelings may have been, he did not show them, but kept those uncannily penetrating eyes of his fixed upon those of his tormentor as if boring through his soul. When Sidoli finished speaking, in the same stern and even voice as before, Monsignore replied: "You have done your duty as regards the Papal Rescript with a commendable promptness of which your past would not have made me think you capable; as to the address to the Pontiff you have planned, it is merely a per-



sonal initiative, and has no bearing upon or interest for the proper administration of the diocese or our duties to God. My clergy can sign it or not, as they please—I will have nothing to say in the matter! Remember, however, that any hopes of preferment you may nourish would be for ever blasted if many priests refused to sign.” Monsignore paused a second, then with tremendous force added: “And I shall *never* sign it! You may go.” The Bishop, standing upright, imperiously pointed to the door, and the Arciprete slunk off like a whipped cur.

When Monsignore, after a solitary struggle to overcome the pounding of his heart, summoned Don Paolino, it was to give him the order to request Capelletti, Prina, and a few other parish priests who had been most intimately identified with the propaganda of the Agrarian League to visit Monsignore at once. The secretary grumbled and recriminated most rebelliously, but had finally to obey, because of Sandri’s warning that anything was better for Monsignore than openly opposing his wishes. This request procured another disappointment to Villarosa; all these priests, with the exception of Capelletti and Prina, replied, with excuses more or less pitiable and lame, that they would come later or as soon as they could.



As it was not and could not be an official command, there were no grounds to insist, but Monsignore had no such intention, and only smiled bitterly and contemptuously as he read their replies.

However, he must still have believed in Capelletti and Prina, who came together; the first had a great influence upon a large number of his colleagues, and his refusal to sign Sidoli's address would certainly be imitated by many, and the second's facile pen might be precious in an eventual press campaign against the same address, so Monsignore wanted to secure the co-operation of both. But above all, the defeated prelate wanted the moral consolation of feeling that he was not alone, that other priests were sharing his ideals, and that these ideals still stood unshaken. The two visitors saw at once the ravages wrought upon Monsignore's health, and selfish and base though their souls must have been, the cruel change in their good Bishop's lovable face struck them perchance with a pang of regret and remorse. But they had long been traitors to him in their hearts, and now they saw that they had to deceive the old man. They lied unflinchingly and unblushingly, and Monsignore's hopes seemed to run high, as they loudly and indignantly denounced Sidoli's address and proclaimed their unalterable



devotion to the principles set forth by their "great leader." So they left Villarosa apparently cheerful and consoled; but a fortnight later the *Corriere Cattolico* published with great enthusiasm Sidoli's pompous composition, followed by the signatures of nearly three hundred priests, and among the first were the names of Davide Capelletti and Sisto Prina. Judas-like, they had sold their master, the former for the nomination as Prevosto to a rich and fashionable church in Milan, the latter for a strong subsidy from the Vatican Press Fund.

All the priests of the diocese obeyed as sheep, such men as Ranzi, the black-souled Curato of La Cascinetta, being indefatigable in collecting signatures; but he, at least, got what he so richly deserved, as having by mischance encountered Don Paolino in a solitary path behind Casbenno, and twitted him about the address, that worthy hillman wholly forgot his cloth and thrashed the scoundrel till he howled for mercy, sending him on his way home with a final kick to hide for a long time his swollen and discolored features.

From then on Monsignore was absolutely alone. The shock caused by the treason of those whom he had believed to be his faithful disciples was, however, not as severe as Sandri and Don Paolino



had feared. From that high plane of spirituality he had attained he must have fathomed, some time before, the shallow depths of those puny and tortuous souls, and detected the false ring of the base metal. When he saw their signatures, he did not inveigh against them or denounce them pitilessly with the vivid eloquence of former days; he quietly gazed out on the fast falling snow which blurred his beloved landscape, and remarked to his good secretary, almost beside himself with indignation: "Poor benighted souls! May my Master pardon them as freely as I do, for they have ears, and they hear not—aye, and eyes, and they cannot see." His only visitor was Dr. Sandri, who came daily and stayed as long as he possibly could. Guido, as often as his duties permitted, came to pass a day with his uncle, but despite the veil drawn over the past, there always persisted a subtle restraint in their intercourse; the subject of his marriage with Delia had never been discussed again between them, but it was in the mind of both, and the young man felt, with a very comprehensible impatience, that if his fiancée was unwilling to name at last a date for the ceremony, it was exclusively due to her desire not to increase the sorrows of Monsignore at that melancholy hour of his career.



Delia's resistance, however, could not last much longer, and she finally surrendered to the persistent entreaties of her lover; the marriage was to take place in the second week in May. But this only upon one condition: Guido must make another attempt, and if the news disturbed or saddened Monsignore in the least, the young man must be willing to delay the ceremony again indefinitely. For this purpose Guido obtained a week's furlough, and came to Casbenno, very doubtful of how his uncle would receive his communication. They had agreed, it was true, that when the moment came he should personally notify his uncle of the date fixed for the wedding, but, wishing to neglect no precaution in the actual precarious condition of Monsignore's health, he first interviewed Dr. Sandri, who shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"Can't tell! I know something about men—plain, ordinary men. He's the first and only saint I've attended. You must take your chance, that's all!"

However, the young man's anxiety was allayed from the beginning of their interview as Monsignore looked and felt much better; the prospect of having his "boy" near him during a whole week had brightened him considerably. He



listened, it is true, with a grave face to Guido's preparatory phrases, but interrupted him with a peculiar note of anxious interrogation in his voice, saying: "I understand, my boy, I understand; but has the day been fixed, and when?" Then, without waiting for an answer, he added, almost shyly: "Does *she* bear me any ill-will?" Guido saw his chance, and was no laggard in seizing the opportunity presented to him. He spoke of Delia as he never had done before, telling Monsignore of the infinite sweetness of her soul, of the great wave of tenderness which had come over her upon their memorable first encounter, of her admiration for the thinker and the hero, and of her steadfast refusal to be married if that were to cause him the slightest grief.

Monsignore listened with his eyes closed, as if afraid to reveal the emotion by which he was overwhelmed; for the first time in months his poor, tortured heart felt a Divine balm soothe inexpressibly the mortal wound by which it had been struck, and he murmured to himself, so softly that Guido could not hear him: " 'Perfect love casteth out all fear.' " He was silent for a long time after the "boy" had finished his say, then serenely, almost sternly, he said: "The laws of my Church know of no exceptions, and to my profound grief



your marriage cannot be sanctified and blessed by the holy rites of my Church, which in other circumstances I would have celebrated with a heart brimming over with love and gratitude to God. Yet, my son, she whom you have chosen is all I could wish for you, and while she acknowledges not my faith, she is nearer to my Master than many of us, priests though we are. So, not only would it be cruel and useless to postpone your union on my behalf, but, in the higher light by which men and things are now perceived by me, it would be wrong. So, marry her, my son, at the date you have arranged. If my enemies heard me, maybe, my words would be treasured and used against me, but nevertheless I am perfectly free from any pangs of conscience. May God bless and prosper Delia and you, my son, as I do now with all my soul," and he murmured a short prayer. For the first time Monsignore had called Delia by her Christian name. He had not hesitated; the name came easily and fluently, as if in his heart he had been long accustomed to think of her as some one very near and dear.

When Dr. Sandri came for his usual visit, he was greeted by his patient in better spirits than he had seen him in for many a weary week, and Monsignore himself announced to him the forth-



coming marriage of Guido to Donna Delia Leoni, not hiding that he was, on principle, as firmly opposed to divorce as before, but would not oppose the union as Donna Delia was—— Sandri cut him short in high glee, crying joyously: “A peach. Told you so the first day. And, furthermore, an angel. Give me saints for mulishness. Yes, sir! You’ve found out, to be sure. I’m glad. She’ll take care of——” and he was going to ramble on, in that tone, when Guido nudged him in the ribs to remind him that nothing had been said as yet that could be interpreted as to whether he would or not receive Guido’s wife. So the conversation was allowed to drift on to other topics, and a few hours after Guido went up to the Villa Meroni, and carried to his sweetheart the response of Monsignore.

Ever since the ratification of the new pact of tenantry in Corgeno, the peasants had rapidly realised the enormous advantages that the new order of things had brought to them, and, accordingly, everything went on as smoothly and pleasantly as possible, almost as if there was a sort of honeymoon between tenants and landlord. The peasants vied among themselves to furnish the so-called *giornate d’obbligo* (“days of obligatory labor”), the remuneration for which had been



trebled by Monsignore, and the old overseer, Girola, who in the days of Graglia had a hard time to obtain the men he needed, was now tormented out of all patience by the insistence of those who were anxious to come, whether wanted or not. It is true that during the troubled times preceding the riot in Varese the peasants of Corgeno had, if blindly, followed the example of the others, and that a number of them had actually taken part in the riot, but, after all, Monsignore had no fault to find with them, though much saddened by their lack of understanding and gratitude. On the whole he was well satisfied with the results of his experiment, and loved to point it out as an unanswerable demonstration of what could have been done everywhere else. Even Don Paolino, the incorrigible pessimist where peasants were concerned, was reluctantly compelled to recognise that, for once, he had misjudged them. When important and undelayable reparations had to be made in the roof of the episcopal villa, every one was agreed that for a fortnight the family be moved to Corgeno. Early in February, choosing a favorable day, Monsignore and Don Paolino, with the necessary servants, drove to the old Villarosa home, and took up their temporary quarters.



Monsignore found on his arrival the usual crowd of peasants ready to greet him in the street, but was immediately struck, and Don Paolino even more than himself, by a subtle transformation in their manners. It was evident that the men moved and looked about more freely and openly, with much of their usual hang-dog and sneaking expression cleared from their hard faces, and appeared better clothed and better fed; but, at the same time, a bold, almost sneeringly condescending expression qualified their attitudes, which unavoidably grated upon the nerves of the aristocrat, which Monsignore invincibly was, and of Don Paolino, who instinctively fathomed more deeply than his master the real meaning of the transformation. The women, no doubt, were still unchanged and quite as profuse in their salutations and genuflexions; but then, they were far yet from experiencing the effects of the new times, for their lords and masters, though now prating of liberty and equality, took good care to enforce, exactly as in the olden times, their undiscussed and tyrannic authority. So the reception of Monsignore appeared, on the surface, quite as cordial as it ever had been, and he passed into the old house smiling contentedly to those whom he still loved to call his children.



At the Castello he found to receive him the Board of the Agricultural Association and also the expert surveyor, who, according to the old Lombard habit, inspected yearly the woods, keeping tally of the trees which had been cut the year before, of those naturally dead or decayed, and imparted orders for the next season. The surveyor, old-fashioned and meticulous, had a very sorry tale to relate, and was highly incensed by the ruthless and wholly arbitrary destruction dealt in his much beloved woods. The peasants had practically stolen three times as much timber as they were entitled to by their contract, and the surveyor, without demur, volubly poured it all out at once to Monsignore, in the presence of the Board, as the directors were, of course, to be held responsible for the serious damage inflicted on the estate. Now it was a well-known peculiarity of Villarosa that the useless cutting of even a single tree greatly angered him, as he loved them with all his soul; so Monsignore turned upon Centeu, the president, and very sternly demanded an immediate and satisfactory explanation. To the old gentleman's evident displeasure and surprise, there was no hurried and shamefaced denial of the allegations, not even a more or less clumsy attempt to bring forward extenuating circum-



stances. The woods went with the land; they had the land, and therefore the right of using the woods as they saw fit. This was Centeu's argument, and neither he nor the others would budge from that point of view. Monsignore and the surveyor argued and explained with all the means in their power, but it turned out to be all wasted breath, for the more the peasants saw that they had no right of doing what they had done, as they well knew even before, the more obstinately they endeavored to usurp new privileges.

At last Don Paolino could stand it no longer, especially as he saw the weariness and chagrin growing upon Monsignore's face. He turned with such ferocity upon the Board that the peasants stepped back apprehensively, and thundered out to them: "You are a set of damned thieves; the penitentiary is too good for ye, and you'll be there soon!"

Monsignore silenced his secretary, but at the same time he peremptorily demanded that immediate steps should be taken by the Board to stop all illegal cutting of trees, for he understood that this outrageous procedure was still going on. The president and the directors looked stolidly glum, and with low whispers and murmurs finally retired, but they had promised nothing nor had



they given any assurances of their obedience and goodwill. Highly displeased, and feeling worse for the scene which had taken place, Monsignore went at once to his room, and remained in bed that day and the following, while Don Paolino used in vain all his powers of dialectic to persuade his master into a disdainful severity against "that set of malignant scoundrels and thieves."

For the next twenty-four hours nothing happened, but early in the afternoon of the second day, the surveyor, in a breathless state of excitement and pale with fury, rushed up to Monsignore's apartment, and blurted out a most serious piece of news: the peasants, at that very moment, were deliberately cutting down the six great walnut-trees which formed the so-called *Chioso del Conte* (the Count's Grove), a landmark known all over the district; he himself had come unexpectedly upon the woodsmen, and despite his commands, threats, and entreaties, Centeu had flatly refused to stop the criminal outrage, while poor Girola, the overseer, who had imprudently attempted to wrench an axe from one of the men, had been badly hustled away with a bleeding nose and a black eye.

Monsignore's grief and rage then knew no bounds; that grove was extremely dear to him



for a number of sentimental associations. For over a century and a half his forbears had played as children in the shade of those grand old trees, and rested there as old men; he himself could recall that the memories of his childhood were almost inseparably linked with them, and the wanton destruction of that grove, deliberately planned by the peasants' insatiate greed of pelf, illegitimate though it be, and their brutal instinct to defy and insult their master, benefactor, and true friend, almost choked the old gentleman. Once again his pale face grew purple with justified fury, and the historic "Villarosa temper" blazed forth in real earnest; in a voice of thunder he dictated to Don Paolino a letter by which he gave formal notice to the Agricultural Association that the act of brigandage they had committed entitled him to claim from the courts an instant rescission of the lease, and that he would petition for such order at once if they did not leave the other trees of the Count's Grove untouched, make immediate and profound apologies, and dismiss in a body their actual directors, replacing them by such men as he would suggest. Don Paolino volunteered to carry the letter to Centeu, and he departed at once for the grove, as he was spoiling for a fight.



Don Paolino in a few minutes reached the fatal spot, where the ruthless destruction was being rapidly continued, and read aloud to Centeu and the other members of the Board there with him the letter of Monsignore, embellishing it with expletives in the native patois, more formidable than refined. But the result was *nil*. Centeu sought to temporise by urging that nothing could be done until they had obtained the opinion of their lawyer, that same Guidobaldi who had been chosen by Monsignore, but with his next sentence he told his men to hurry up with their job and complete the cutting down of the two remaining trees. Don Paolino, livid with rage, lifted his heavy stick upon the president, but the peasants closed around with such murderous faces that the secretary, fearless though he was, had to beat a hasty retreat, pursued by the taunts and gibes of the men.

That same evening a procession of peasants paraded ostentatiously in front of the old Villarosa mansion, with loud cries of "Viva" for the president and the directors. In spite of all Don Paolino could say, Monsignore, hoping by his words and his presence to call them back to reason and decency, insisted upon appearing upon one of the balconies overlooking the street. As he



lifted his arm to signal that he was about to address them, a sinister shout of "Morte a Monsignore!" came from a corner of the crowd, and one stone hurtled at his feet, narrowly missing him. Unafraid, the Bishop faced the mob, and the supreme majesty of the man was so great, his pallid face and silver locks so unearthly grand, that, as if struck by a sudden panic, they took to their heels and fled ignominiously. A moment after Monsignore was seized by a second, and much more serious, attack of angina pectoris.



## CHAPTER XII

### THE WEAPONS OF ROME

THE iniquitous conduct of the Corgeno peasants, who had been treated by Monsignore with such extraordinary kindness and forethought, at a great sacrifice of his own legitimate interests, made a tremendous impression everywhere. The press, even the Socialist papers, had severe words of condemnation, but the organs of the landlords gloated over "the deserved punishment which had overtaken the principal instigator of the disgraceful agrarian agitation." Guido, telegraphically summoned by Don Paolino when the attack of angina pectoris overcame Monsignore, rushed to Corgeno, and by his impetuosity made things even worse, as, armed with a hunting-crop, and in the presence of a crowd of peasants too terrified to interfere, he administered a severe thrashing to Centeu, the president, and to Don Paolino's own brother. The suit for a judicial dissolution of the lease was instituted without delay, but the



peasants had Guidobaldi, now member of Parliament for Varese, for their lawyer, and by the influence he had craftily gained and the tricks of procedure in which he was a past master, he managed to draw it out into such intricacies and side-issues that it is probably pending before the courts at the present day.

The attack of angina pectoris, serious as it was, could fortunately be overcome, thanks to the energetic treatment prescribed by Dr. Sandri, who arrived upon the spot almost at once, racing madly in an automobile. But when all immediate danger had been averted he warned Guido and Don Paolino that the condition of his patient was most threatening, as the repetition of such an attack might mean instant death, and that, even if no other spasms assailed him, the heart action of Monsignore now was so impaired as to warrant their gravest fears. Sandri ordered likewise that Monsignore should be transported back to Casbenno as soon as possible, for the mere sight of the place in which he had suffered the greatest moral blow perhaps of his existence only kept his mind painfully centred upon it, and this, of course, delayed a recovery. So, four days after the attack, with all possible care and precautions, Monsignore was transported back to the episcopal villa,



though the repairs to it were by no means terminated.

One circumstance, however, greatly favored a rapid, if only temporary, betterment in Monsignore's condition of health; the publishers of his great work had informed him some time previously that the two remaining volumes of *The Symbolism of the Fourth Gospel* would appear simultaneously and very soon, as they had come to the conclusion that such a masterpiece must be placed before the public at once, and in its entirety. So Villarosa had been steadily receiving the proofs and correcting and recorrecting them with indefatigable industry and patience. Even when ill abed, even though distracted and embittered by the treachery of his clergy or the ingratitude of the peasants, he never neglected his work, much to the horror and dismay of Don Paolino, who, having no doubts left as to the results, tried to persuade Dr. Sandri into vetoing absolutely this occupation. In the beginning Sandri sustained Don Paolino, but soon changed his mind, as he saw that, far from hurting his patient, this work was a great consolation and tonic for him. At last the advance copies arrived, and Monsignore's pride and happiness were unbounded and most touching to behold. For a while he forgot his



sorrows, for a short time he was once more the brilliant Monsignor Villarosa of his palmiest days; he twitted Don Paolino and joked about him, but, of a sudden, a dark cloud obscured the Bishop's brow, and his head sank back wearily on his pillows; all the life, all the joy, all the excitement passed away, and, quaintly imitating Don Paolino when alluding to Rome, he repeatedly jerked his right thumb over his left shoulder and queried, "What *will* they say over there?"

The publication of the philosophical portion of Monsignor Villarosa's great work not only confirmed but intensified the remarkable success of the first volume. An unbroken concert of admiration and respect sounded in the scientific and philosophic circles of the whole world. It was not only the wonderful depth and width of its exegetical value, not only the crystal clearness of its logic, the ingenuity of its historical reconstruction, which drew the unanimous praise, but it struck all by the saintliness of its conclusions and by the novel and overpowering majesty and sweetness with which the author had known how to endow the figure of the living Christ. But, at the same time, it was supremely modern, and because of this it destroyed pitilessly many time-worn legends and spurious interpretations, fruit of misapprehen-



sion and of ignorance that the Church had not only allowed to grow around the Fourth Gospel, but unjustifiably embodied into its creed. On account of this, it ran athwart of the blind followers of dogma, and might be considered as highly heretical by them; but the true thinkers and students could but praise unstintingly. Then Monsignore received a large number of telegrams and letters from the greatest theologians of the world, from Munich and Upsala, from Vienna and Paris, from Oxford and Würzburg, with warm words of praise and sympathy, and so, for a time, the eyes of the world's élite were centred upon the silent episcopal villa of Casbenno.

Monsignore read those telegrams with the pale ghost of a smile upon his lips; it seemed as if insensibly he was getting farther and farther from the stress and travail of human life and from its anxieties and satisfactions. Talking was too fatiguing, so he now kept silent for hours at a stretch, but, in the meanwhile, it was evident that his brain was working more intensely and more easily than ever. To Don Paolino, his faithful and untiring watch-dog, nurse, and confidant, he often expressed the one deeply rooted hope of his heart, which nothing could destroy or minimise; even if Cardinal Bredana and his followers



were to triumph in the Holy Congregation of the Index, his Holiness would never permit that they should prevail in the end, but would recognise and approve the spirit and aim of his life's work. And the good secretary, though in his heart of hearts profoundly and incorrigibly sceptical, was not cruel enough to instil his doubts into the mind of his adored master.

At the Curia, the apparition of Monsignor Villarosa's volumes and the general admiration they elicited created almost a panic. The most learned and most intellectual among the Roman Catholics had given repeated proofs of a growing disposition to question, and even ignore, the decisions of the Curia, thus indicating the existence of a latent spirit of revolt against its dictates, and a tendency to demand radical reforms in its principles and actions; if the faction which had ruled at Rome so long hoped to preserve their omnipotent and unquestioned power, they must nip at once this fractiousness in the bud. From all sides most devout and pure-minded men were clamoring that Rome should cease striving and plotting to regain the material and temporal dominion it had lost, and should devote all its energy to maintain and widen its spiritual authority. This, of all prospects, was the most threatening for the Curia



and its shadowy advisers, men who are the effective *sans-patrie* as much as the exponents of extreme anarchism, many of them, shameful as it may be to say it, Italians who would have gladly throttled the Unity of their country and drowned it in an ocean of blood, in order to obtain, once more, a pitiful temporal power. These men felt that something must be done at once to check the diffusion of the new ideas, and that a staggering blow must be dealt so that there should be no possible alternative; either return to the fold, humbled and suppliant, or be cast out for ever.

Cardinal Bredana, the leader of the "Temporalists" in Rome, not taking into account his personal hatred, immediately understood that Monsignore Villarosa's book offered a most favorable occasion to strike, and strike hard. No time was lost, no pretence to majestic deliberation assumed; a so-called "confidential" letter was immediately dispatched to the Bishop of Varese, pointing out to him twenty-seven "propositions" of his volumes considered heretical by the Congregation, and adding that, in consideration of his age and position, he was asked privately and in the friendliest intention, to retract them publicly at once. If, however, he refused to submit dutifully, his case, much to the writer's regret, must



be at once forwarded to the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition, and, in this eventuality, his condemnation to the severest ecclesiastical punishment was foreseen as unavoidable. And Cardinal Bredana did not hesitate to sign this letter.

By the strictest orders of Dr. Sandri, all letters coming to the villa must be secretly examined by Don Paolino and himself before they were delivered, carefully reclosed, to their legitimate addressee. This was a patient labor, and no one could ever tell whether Monsignore knew of the fraud or not. When the massive envelope containing Cardinal Bredana's fateful missive arrived, the two loving inquisitors found themselves in a tremendous quandary. How would this affect Villarosa? It might cause a recrudescence of the heart attacks, or it might, on the other hand, arouse the patient from that state of utter listlessness and indifference to all things around him which Sandri considered as one of the worst symptoms. After endless hesitation it was decided to risk it, and Don Paolino handed the letter to the Bishop in Dr. Sandri's presence.

Monsignore's reception of the news was eminently typical of his present state of mind. He read it himself slowly and composedly half aloud; an expression of fervid and indomitable faith and



trust brightened his eyes, which seemed to be looking far away into the impenetrable Unknown, then he simply remarked to the two men, who were fearfully and anxiously scanning every movement of his face: "I have expected this . . . for some time past. Now his Holiness will speak . . . that is all." He then called for his paper, stamped with the Villarosa armorial bearings under the Bishop's mitre, and in his beautifully clear hand wrote swiftly and without hesitation: "To his Eminence Cardinal Bredana, Rome. I answer that I do not answer," and signed "Guidus," with the official seal.

But this communication from the Congregation of the Index was only the forerunner of more comprehensive and far-reaching measures; the Pontiff, ably and unremittingly worked upon by the *camerilla* surrounding him, agreed that the moment had come to speak *ex Cathedra*, and the theological world was suddenly staggered by the publication of the Encyclical "*Pascendi Dominici Gregis*." Then and there the new words "Modernism" and "Modernist" were coined. The best and noblest lay religious thinkers, even those most devoted to the Roman Catholic faith, were appalled by this uncompromising return to the iron-bound rules of mediæval Church tyranny,



by this insane defiance of all the hard-earned victories of modern science and research, by this monumental blunder destined to alienate such a numerous army of hesitating searchers after truth; from every side momentous, though respectful, words of warning were sounded.

But the Curia had the Roman Catholic laymen by the throat, and could threaten them with the terrible dilemma of submission or expulsion. A few, a very few—ardent, undisciplined souls, as they were called even by those most friendly to them, in reality some of the purest and noblest spirits among these laymen—broke loose from Rome altogether. One or two, stricken to the heart, actually succumbed to grief. A venerable poet, loved and respected by the whole of Italy, died in despair, begging from his death-bed a benediction from the Pope which was implacably denied. An English Jesuit Father, a great, noble, lovable soul, foully tortured by all the secret weapons at the disposal of the Curia, expired under the awful strain. For the rest, one by one, they gave up the unequal fight, as they were still suffocated by the blighting atmosphere of their prejudiced mental training, and *humiliter se subjecerunt*. The game had been played, the victory won, and the Curia remained unshaken and



omnipotent as of yore. For the great mass of humanity it was a passing event which left no traces; it was lightly spoken of, then forgotten, and never rightly understood.

On poor, ailing, solitary Monsignor Villarosa the Encyclical had a tragical effect. Uncomprehendingly, with all his faculties adrift, with eyes dilated by a wild terror, Monsignore read and reread for hours at a stretch that terrible document. To him it was even a more frightful blow than to any of the other Roman Catholic Liberals, as nearly every one of his "propositions" objected to by the Congregation of the Index were hypothetically but expressly condemned by the Encyclical, so that there could no longer possibly survive in Monsignore's heart any illusion or any hope as to what the Pontiff would decide about his book. It was the end, the irreparable downfall of his one tenacious conviction, the fatal shipwreck of his whole soul, the death of that ideal which he had cherished since his early manhood. In that long and agonising vigil of a whole night, alone he faced an impelling and terrible choice between his creed and his duty to God. In the early dawn Don Paolino moved uneasily in his sleep upon the truckle-bed where, in spite of his anxiety caused by the shock which the



Encyclical might have inflicted upon Monsignore, he had fallen fast asleep, deceived by the perfect immobility of his charge. Monsignore looked at him with deep tenderness, then, rising noiselessly, he walked in his ample dressing-gown to the broad window and opened it without a sound. He settled himself in his favorite arm-chair, and looking again upon the sleeping secretary, he smiled and murmured to himself, "The Latin was too tough; poor Paolino could not see the point," then turned to the view before him.

The day gave promise of being beautiful; in the soft, velvety dusk he could see, outlined with marvellous clearness, the familiar panorama of his beloved mountains, and, more indistinctly, the hills and the lake. In the sky, right above the imposing mass of Monte Rosa, one great star was shining vividly, and on the rim of the horizon, in the east, an indescribable transparency heralded the sun. A faint, mysterious breath of air rustled through the absolute silence, as if Night were gathering the silken folds of her mantle, then, suddenly, a bird chirped on a neighboring tree, and far on the other side of the lake came the bark of a dog, mellowed by the distance.

Monsignore sat in a sort of trance, with all his soul in his eyes, drinking in greedily that mystical



peace of the new-born day, so wonderfully restful and soothing to the exhausted warrior in his last, supreme encounter; it was only a brief surcease, for he knew that the fateful hour of a decision had sounded. As he was looking, a giant bolt of molten gold lighted upon the summit of Monte Rosa; the glorious mountain blushed a rosy pink, as a maiden at her first kiss of love, and Monsignore, in the torturing joy of his cruel victory, sank to his knees and prayed. The battle was ended; it would be peace henceforth, even if it must be the peace of death. The world, with its dogmas and disciplines, its science and ignorance, had been bloated out for ever; he stood alone before his God. When Don Paolino woke at last, with a start, he was most gratified to discover Monsignore in his bed, sleeping as peacefully as a baby.

The Encyclical was to be read in all churches throughout the Roman Catholic world, but when Sidoli came, as in duty bound, to receive those orders which it is usual for a Bishop to impart when a papal document has been forwarded for publication, Monsignore quietly but resolutely refused to impart directions of any kind, and told the Arciprete that he was at liberty to do whatever he chose about it. Sidoli's amazement knew



no bounds; he had no doubts in his mind that Villarosa, sooner or later, must surrender, and the calm, collected, and purposeful resistance of the old man was wholly incomprehensible to him. He therefore wrote a long and detailed letter to the Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan asking for advice, and urging that something should be done at once.

Effectively Monsignor Villarosa had received his death-blow. Dr. Sandri could not have told it, because, curiously, the physical organs of his patient were not in any worse condition than before; all the physician could note was a slow but steady ebbing away of animal vitality and a corresponding increase of power in the spiritual energy. To use a hackneyed expression, the blade was destroying its sheath. Above all, there was not the slightest desire to live, although apparently Monsignore had regained his cheerful disposition, and was kindness and patience personified. After an unusually cold and inclement winter, as it often happens in the Lombard hills, April had set in with most lovely weather, balmy and soft, continued sunshine and tepid nights. Vegetation was bursting forth everywhere, and by the orders of Dr. Sandri, Monsignore passed most of the day in the garden in his Bath chair,



or even occasionally walking a few steps. Don Paolino always pushed the chair himself, and woe betide whoever dared usurp this function! The mutual confidence and tenderness between master and secretary was profoundly touching, and no one could have watched the pair without a moistening of the eyes.

In these conditions, the date fixed for the marriage of Delia and Guido was rapidly approaching. It had been decided that it should take place in Varese, at the Stato Civile of that town, because at the last municipal elections the Radicals had ousted the Clericals, and Dr. Sandri was one of the *assessori* destined to celebrate the civil marriage, which, according to the Italian law, is the only legally binding union. Monsignore was of course informed of all these particulars, and unobtrusively took the greatest interest in them, although even Don Paolino could not tell to what extent the feelings of his master concerning young Guido's marriage had been modified. Monsignore, however, had written a letter to the family solicitor, and Dr. Ceretti had come in person from Milan bearing a bulky and mysterious package, which Monsignore had carefully locked up himself in his private safe.

The marriage was only forty-eight hours away,



and on that morning Monsignore, to the astonishment of Don Paolino, seemed extremely fidgety, a remarkable contrast with his now habitually peaceful and listless manner, and insisted upon being dressed with unusual elegance and care. After he was carried downstairs, he sat in his Bath chair, holding upon his knees the package arrived the day before, and asked Don Paolino to push the chair towards the gate. The wish was as unusual as the rest of Monsignore's conduct on that day, but Don Paolino obeyed without hesitation, little dreaming of the much greater surprise in store for him. When they reached the gate the old gentleman turned right round in his place so that he could see well the secretary's face, then with almost a twinkle in his eye, he said: "Paolino, my son . . . you are very strong, and I . . . do not weigh much . . . so roll me up . . . to the Villa Meroni." Don Paolino's big mouth opened in blank and speechless astonishment; for a moment he thought that his master had taken leave of his senses; but the quiet, smiling expression of the face looking up at him dispelled his doubts, so he continued to push the chair up the hill, finding it impossible to overcome his amazement.

They toiled slowly up the winding drive without



meeting a soul, and finally reached the esplanade in front of the house, without exchanging a word, as Monsignore was deeply immersed in thought. A deep bay startled Don Paolino, and he stopped short in visible alarm as Simoun, the great mastiff, bounded towards them. Immediately behind the dog was Delia, looking more lovely than ever in her simple white dress. This time the young woman was taken completely by surprise, and she started visibly, recognising her unexpected visitor, but it was far more the effect of the subtle change in Monsignore's expression than his presence in her garden which had struck her. Delia's feminine acuity of vision saw perchance what man's grosser clay could not perceive, the irradiation of some wondrous internal flame which had devoured all that was not undying, and exalted that spirit to a plane seldom trodden by the feet of mortal beings.

Monsignore smiled, enjoying her surprise; he turned to Don Paolino, who stood as transfixed and said: "Go, my son, for a nice walk; some one will call you when necessary," then with a graceful yet stately inclination of his snowy curls, he addressed Delia: "Excuse me, Donna Delia, if I do not rise, but I am not allowed to do so by Dr. Sandri," and as he saw Don Paolino already far



off, he added: "Will you not come nearer to me, or do you dislike and distrust me still?" Delia's heart was deeply touched by that pathetic appeal. She stepped rapidly forward and came quite close, so that her dress almost brushed his arm, but she could not trust herself to speak. Monsignore continued: "Will you not give me your hand?" and he lifted his arm almost shyly. Delia, delicately, as if fearing to hurt those slender, transparent fingers, took them in hers, then in a sudden, irresistible impulse, bent her head upon them and kissed them reverently. The act was so profoundly tender, yet so utterly devoid of that ceremonial quality to which Monsignore had been accustomed, that, greatly pleased, he quaintly whispered to her: "For the man, is it not? but not for the Bishop?" Then he continued in his clear, musical voice: "Delia, in two days' time you will be the wife of my Guido, and I now know that I can trust his happiness into your hands. Life is at best very uncertain, and when I go I will leave my memory and my name to Guido's care and to yours. My grief is still very great at the thought that no one will invoke a blessing upon your union, but——" For a while he hesitated, as if listening in doubt to a voice far away and not clear enough, as Delia sank upon her knees on the



turf by his side still holding his hand, so that their heads were on a level and quite near to each other. Monsignore's eyes then lighted up with an expression of far-seeing tenderness, almost unearthly in its sublime comprehension, and he continued at last: "But, 'those whom God hath joined together, no man *can* put asunder,' as you said to me when I came to threaten and defy you, and you, a child, defeated and silenced me with words which have graven themselves indelibly on my mind; and as I know that God has joined your hearts, and blessed them Himself with His purest blessing, what is the importance of man's puny invocation? What can he add to that which is already yours?" Then, in a lighter mood, he opened the package resting upon his knees, and from its velvet case he drew a magnificent *parure* of emeralds and diamonds, the celebrated Villarosa jewels, and deftly clasping it around her neck, continued: "These gems have been worn for three centuries by the Contesse Villarosa, the last, by my mother; they are now yours," and he caressed the proud little head bent before him.

Delia, tongue-tied till then, was at last able to tell how she loved and revered him, the boy-hero of "The Thousand," the self-sacrificing apostle of the down-trodden, the sainted martyr



of light and truth, who stood alone and unafraid, defying the secular omnipotence of the Scarlet Woman of the Seven Hills. She spoke long and passionately, with an eloquence and a force unsuspected in her calm, well-poised nature, and with an indomitable conviction which brought to Monsignore's broken heart the last and proudest consolation of his life. When she ceased speaking, he gathered her to his heart, and kissed her tenderly upon the forehead, over those wild, hawk-like eyes of hers, now overflowing with unshed tears. As Delia stood up, Don Paolino hove into sight, in a state of morbid curiosity too laughable to behold, and Monsignore took leave of Delia. For the rest of the day Villarosa sat silently musing, with a wonderful smile upon his lips.

Two days after Delia and Guido were quietly married at the Palazzo Comunale by Dr. Sandri, the only drop of bitterness in their full cup of joy being that Monsignore was not present. They had decided to take a short automobile trip instead of the classical wedding journey, as the doctor had declared very earnestly that, in the present condition of Monsignore, it would be unadvisable for them to go far away. After the ceremony Sandri hurried to Casbenno, and found his pa-



tient in the greatest and most pleasurable excitement, gayer than he had been for months before. He was, of course, obliged to relate all that had taken place in its minutest particulars, and Monsignore never seemed to tire of the topic. But, stranger still, the fact that the marriage had taken place seemed to lift a heavy weight from Monsignore's mind, and he spoke continually and unrestrainedly of Guido and Delia as "my children."

This conduct of a Roman Catholic, a priest and a Bishop, at any rate in Italy, was absolutely an unheard-of event, and it leaked out almost at once. The gossip of the servants, and, it must be added, Dr. Sandri's unbounded admiration for the broad-mindedness of his patient, spread it about, to the enormous scandal of an overwhelming majority, composed of all the practising Roman Catholics, and of the so-called "society" people, who, though not caring an iota for Church or religion, were opposed to divorce from ignorance, personal motives, or unreasoning prejudice. Through Sidoli, the Roman Curia was immediately informed of this tremendous scandal, depicted under the most sinister light that hatred could conceive, and with preposterous insinuations, such as only the diseased imagination of a frenzied



priest can fabricate. Cardinal Bredana used this new weapon at once and with implacable ability.

About ten days after Guido's marriage a special decree of the Holy Congregation of the Index was issued, and published *urbi et orbi*; it contained at full length the solemn and unqualified condemnation of Monsignor Villarosa's three volumes, *The Symbolism of the Fourth Gospel*, as "a malignant and wicked heresy," as an insufferable and shameless attack upon the very foundations of the faith, and therefore to be shunned by all Catholics as a mortal sin. The author was given, notwithstanding, out of "undeserved commiseration," three whole days to humbly submit to this decree, which, if not obeyed in the allotted time, would entail measures of a still more drastic nature. This document was approved and countersigned by his Holiness himself.

The impression created by this condemnation was widespread and disastrous; Roman Catholic thinkers felt mortally wounded by this verdict of Rome, especially endorsed by the Pope, against a work of such genuine evangelical ideals; but their useless opposition against the Encyclical had utterly routed them, and they knew that the Curia would be, as it has always been, pitiless in its victory, and that to raise their voices in in-



dignant defence of the Bishop of Varese would only mean to share his fate. In self-defence they kept silent in public, though privately expressing themselves in no moderate terms, so that not a word was spoken in favor of Villarosa. Outside of the Roman Catholic Church, where no such precautions were needed, great men of international repute expressed their unmitigated and contemptuous disapproval; but these denunciations, wise and eloquent though they were, seemed to strengthen the fiat of Rome, as it was pointed out that the apologists of Villarosa's book were well known and uncompromising enemies of the Church.

The official notification of the sentence pronounced upon his book reached Monsignore contemporaneously with the printed bulletin. Though the old prelate had long since schooled himself to face the inevitable, though he must have known that it was bound to happen, though his mind was rising far above the reach of human hatred, there must have lurked at the bottom of his heart a wild, illogical hope that the Pontiff might still rise above the surrounding corruption of the true faith and be inspired by the Holy Ghost. The Pope's approval of the iniquitous sentence was the drop that made his full cup of bitterness and despair overflow; nothing was left to him, nothing but



the barren and disconsolate waste of his existence, sacrificed miserably to the pursuit of an impossible dream. For a second, but for a second only, what little was still left in him of the perishable impulses of the flesh rebelled, and a curse came to his lips—a curse upon his birth, upon life that had moulded his destiny, upon God and country, to which he had sacrificed all. But the curse died unspoken upon his trembling lips, and with one mighty sob that shook his emaciated form, he fell upon his knees in an ecstasy of prayer and contrition. The battle was finally and completely won, and peace, that “peace which passeth all understanding” settled upon his brow and crowned it for ever.

But if the soul had stood unflinchingly the supreme test, it was not to be so with the body. Monsignore, a few hours after receiving the news, was struck by a third attack of angina pectoris; it was, however, so slight and lasted so short a time that Dr. Sandri not only thought it quite unadvisable to wire for Guido and Delia, but rejoiced for a time in the illusion that the organically strong constitution of his patient was gradually overcoming the dangerous tendency to this form of attack. But this illusion was doomed to be blighted very soon; that great heart which had



beaten so strongly for all that was beautiful, pure, and noble had given way under the fatal strain too long imposed upon it. Without any disease to which a name could be given, it was completely exhausted, and its fibres were insensibly but continually weakening. Every means that science and ingenuity could suggest were tried by Sandri, but with no results. It was as if the mainspring of Monsignore's organism had permanently lost its elasticity, and was pulsating slower and slower, until it was silenced for ever. Life for him was ebbing out steadily towards the great unknown sea, and as each outgoing ripple followed the other, Monsignore's mind grew more and more remote from the earthly shore he was about to leave. The dissolution of his body was a consequence of the integration of his soul, and good Don Paolino, with all his devotion and faithfulness, felt that the master with whom he had lived all his life and had accordingly known better than any one else, was gradually getting higher and higher away from him, to an elevation which his simple, untutored mind could not even appreciate. And so his loving care transformed itself into a sort of awed adoration, which impelled him to fall on his knees before Monsignore and worship him.



But as Monsignor Villarosa's soul rose above the toil and moil of this life, it grew more distant from those surrounding him, and therefore his solitude became absolute and complete, as speaking entailed a material effort almost unbearable. He sat for hours in his great arm-chair, his eyes apparently fixed upon the glorious landscape of the lake and hills, but really sounding the mysterious, unfathomable abysses before him, his own soul, and the unknown beyond. And as he plumbed deeper into those eternal problems, with that strange new vision with which he was endowed, his last doubts, his lingering hesitations, the final crux of his great problem seemed cleared; the uplifting power of death had explained life, and, at last, he knew. One link yet connected him with the earth; he longed to have Guido and Delia near him, to listen to their loving words, and to bask, if only for a little while, in the sunshine of their happiness. A new resolution, at first hazy and indistinct, then, little by little, assuming gradually a clearer form, crystallised in his mind, but he did not immediately mention it, waiting till the moment should come.

On account of his illness, Monsignore had for some time past been unable to perform his many episcopal duties; up to his third seizure, however,



he had rarely missed saying his daily Mass, though, of course, he could not take part in the functions of the cathedral. He, however, continued his active interest in the spiritual and disciplinary affairs of the diocese, and, when the occasion arose, demonstrated that his customary energy had by no means forsaken him. Don Felice Ranzi, the Curato of La Cascinetta, fell athwart of this energy, when a scandal that had been brewing for some time broke out violently. It was of such a sordid and revolting nature, and had, moreover, particulars so narrowly bordering upon crime, that the least said about it the better. Dr. Sandri, boiling over with indignation, brought the facts of the case to Monsignore's notice, and after a thorough examination of the matter, the Bishop dictated a strong letter to the accused priest, demanding of him an immediate and comprehensive explanation, with positive proofs of his innocence. Don Felice, in reply, sent a curt, flat, and even insolent denial of all facts alleged, but not the slightest rebuttal of the testimony against him, and Monsignore promptly suspended him *a divinis*.

At last Sidoli's continued insistence with the Cardinal-Archbishop and with Cardinal Bredana in Rome brought its fruit, and his activity against Monsignor Villarosa was amply rewarded by the



Curia. In a Consistory then held by the Pope, Arciprete Sidoli was created Bishop of Hermopolis *in partibus infidelium*, and named Suffragan to the titular Bishop of Varese, with the eventual reversal of the see. Now, it is perfectly regular and proper to name such Suffragans in cases of total incapacity, either mental or physical, of the head of a diocese; but Monsignore could still exercise, in part at least, the most important functions of his position, and it was evident that Sidoli's nomination meant that the Curia was following unswervingly its line of policy as a reprisal for Villarosa's tacit refusal to obey the injunctions of the Holy Congregation of the Index. Sidoli, without an hour's delay (an unheard-of event), was consecrated in the Cathedral of Milan by Cardinal-Archbishop Baraldi, and returned in hot haste to Varese to occupy at once his new position. In his spiteful cruelty he gloated at the idea of oppressing and tormenting with renewed venom the man whom he temperamentally hated, with the hate of ignorance and darkness for knowledge and light; it has been said that the *furor ecclesiasticus* knows no restraint, and Sidoli was a specimen of its power.

Monsignor Villarosa had just overcome his third attack; and though it had seemed to be com-



paratively light and unimportant, Sandri and Don Paolino had decided that it would be wise to hide from him Sidoli's exaltation to a bishopric and the man's election to Suffragan, as from their own unbounded indignation they gauged the impression the news would make upon the patient. But they knew not the depth of Sidoli's malice, and the anxious watchers round Monsignore's bed were startled next morning by the voice of the quondam Arciprete, loudly calling for admission; how he had been able to reach the hall immediate to Monsignore's chamber was never ascertained. The low, silken, mellifluous tones of the once cringing hypocrite had changed into a loud and sonorous bellow, which he must have imagined imposing, so that Monsignore, though lost and far away in his meditations, could not help hearing the noise. But before his master could ask any questions, Don Paolino had bounded out of the room, and was, metaphorically, if not quite materially, at the throat of the unwelcome visitor. This interview was unquestionably noisy, for the discussion rapidly degenerated into a very undignified scuffle, and Monsignore recognised the voice of Sidoli threatening Don Paolino with all the thunderbolts of his canonic vengeance if not ushered in at once.



"This is the episcopal villa; I am Bishop-Coadjutor of this diocese!" the irate priest was screaming. "Get out of my way, you low peasant! I have the right to see Villarosa now and at all times, even if he is playing sick!"

With an admirable display of calm strength of will, Monsignore straightened himself up in bed, and in a voice as clear and far-reaching as a clarion, commanded: "Paolino, introduce that man instantly. Sidoli, Bishops are created by his Holiness the Pope, but God alone can create a gentleman. Say then your say, for I am ready to listen."

As Sidoli entered, arrayed in his bran-new violet gown and sash, with insulting mien and provoking gait, the sight of that wonderful pale face, aureoled by a wealth of silver curls, struck him for a second with awe; he saw there the reflection of some unknown, superhuman light which dazzled him; but he immediately recovered his assurance, and in a familiar, half-scoffing tone, a remarkable contrast with the servile address of a few days before, he said: "Brother Guido, the Pontiff has named me Bishop and Suffragan of this diocese to relieve you from your duties, too onerous for a sick man of your age. I will take possession of the diocese at once, and all corre-



spondence must now be sent to me. But, Brother Guido, as an old friend, I feel in duty bound to warn you that it is not so much your health but your actions which has made my nomination necessary. You are in very bad odor in Rome, so you had better hurry up and repudiate your heresies and make amends for your conduct. And as I am here, you had better confess your sin to me at once. If you do not, I shudder to think what is going to happen."

Monsignor Villarosa listened patiently, then a glorious smile of contempt illuminated his countenance; he looked at the viperine face of his tormentor unflinchingly, and said: "You have well deserved your pay, Sidoli, and the Curia has a Bishop worthy of itself; be, then, Bishop to your heart's content. But my conscience is mine own, and it is not meet for a Sidoli to advise Guido Villarosa. Go!" and imperially, with vengeful arm outstretched and untrembling hand, he pointed to the door.

The new Bishop, unapostolically foaming with rage, was about to attack his enemy by a storm of low invective, when Sandri intervened, and with no tender hands caught the visitor by the shoulders, and hustled him out of the room and out of the house, growling in the coward's ear



such threats of bodily punishment if he dared persecute again a dying man, that Sidoli, as white as a sheet, with his new gown and sash sorely rumpled, fled blaspheming.

The official acts of the new Suffragan were a continual nullification of all that Monsignor Villarosa had painstakingly achieved for the spiritual uplift of the diocese. One of the first things he did was to revoke by a pompous letter the suspension *a divinis* of Don Felice Ranzi, congratulating him on setting at naught the calumnious and malignant accusations against his high moral character; later, to the scandal of all honest people, he named the criminal priest to be the Arciprete of Varese's cathedral. Sidoli imagined that all this would be as gall and wormwood to Villarosa, but he could not guess that neither he nor any one else could now inflict any pain upon the dying Bishop, as his spirit, soaring above the stress and travail of this earth, was winging its flight towards the Infinite.

About a fortnight after the marriage of Guido and Delia, Monsignore finally made up his mind, and he did not lose an hour to act after he decided. He abruptly asked Sandri to wire to his "children" the following words: "Come to me at once," and he signed "Ziggio." And as both Don Paolino



and Sandri, in great terror and anxiety, pressed him with numberless and insistent questions about how he felt, fearing that he must be worse, he replied with a peaceful and cheering smile: "No, my dear friends; on the contrary, I now feel almost well."



## CHAPTER XIII

### GOD WILL DECIDE!

DELIA and Guido had wandered a little out of their itinerary, having discovered, far up in the hills of the Lago di Garda, a tiny village with an old inn, just the fitting nest in which to hide their happiness. Monsignore's telegram was accordingly somewhat delayed, but as soon as it was delivered they started immediately, racing back in defiance of all speed limits. At first they were greatly upset by the sudden call, though Delia, always calm and level-minded, pointed out that if Monsignore had sent a message himself he could not be much worse, and that the signature conveyed a particular expression of tenderness, as it was addressed to both of them. Delia, with a woman's unerring intuition, felt sure that this victim of a long and cruel persecution thirsted for the companionship and devoted care of the nephew he loved so dearly, and perhaps even for her presence, as she knew that the opinions of



Monsignore had been undergoing a steady process of evolution.

They reached Casbenno late one afternoon, and the first words of Dr. Sandri, who received them at the entrance, dispelled their immediate fears, although the news he gave them of Monsignore's condition cast a deep gloom upon them, for he made them understand that, despite all his efforts, he had reached the end of his medical resources; Monsignore would not be much longer with them. Don Paolino, the quaintest presentment of helpless perplexity at the presence of the "new Contessa," a divorced woman, in the Bishop's residence, kept in the background, but followed the others upstairs, as it had been decided not to delay the meeting, for Villarosa had been constantly inquiring if his "children" had not arrived. Dr. Sandri opened the bedroom door, and standing aside to let Delia and Guido enter, closed it carefully, whispering to Don Paolino: "Not for us, now. Down we go."

Villarosa, propped up with many pillows, upon which his head rested wearily, reclined in the great carved-walnut bedstead; his delicate hands, now incredibly thin and transparent, rested limply upon the crimson satin counterpane, and the waxen pallor of his emaciated face made him



appear as if it had been carved in marble. One single electric lamp, heavily shaded, threw a golden circle of mellow light upon his thick silver curls, while from the broad window a ghostly twilight, fast fading into darkness, gave an indistinct view of the large apartment and of the magnificent scenery outside.

Monsignore lay there in that remarkable state of semi-consciousness in which he now habitually remained, and during which his soul seemed straining anxiously yet fearfully at the few strands which connected it with the body, like a young bird still doubtful of its wings. But now there was no difficulty or hesitation for him to return to earth; his strange powers of divination told him before he opened his eyes who had entered the room, and an expression of happiness lit up his countenance as he gazed upon the young couple standing side by side on the threshold.

For Delia and Guido the sight of Monsignore reduced to that incorporeal thinness had been a cruel shock. They realised at once that Sandri had warned them with good reason, and the tender smile which greeted them made the prospect of a coming separation unspeakably more bitter. But, through that heavy pall of sorrow, as through a glass, darkly, they had a glimpse of the deathless



flame of faith and love steadily burning within that wasted frame, and they instinctively felt that to grieve for him or to begrudge his liberation from his earthly shackles would be cruel and selfish. So the young couple stood in an awed silence; he feasted his hungry eyes upon them, and at last he spoke: "May God bless you, my children, for coming so soon!" and he opened his arms to them. Delia would have pushed Guido first, but Monsignore divined more than saw her movement, and added, "No, neither of you first, but both together."

They obeyed, bending from each side of the bed to him, and he lovingly gathered those two young heads to his breast and kissed them with infinite tenderness. As he did so they sank slowly to their knees, and there remained, while he spoke to them in short sentences, interrupted by frequent intervals of enforced rest, during which he stroked caressingly their bowed heads.

He told them how infinitely he had longed for their presence, but that he had other than merely selfish motives when he interrupted their honeymoon. Every day it was becoming more painful for him to speak, and yet, ere he crossed over to the distant shore where his Master was calling him, there were many things he wished to tell



them. They both knew the history of his childhood and early youth, and how he had gravely sinned by breaking the oaths he had taken before God; they knew how he had atoned for his transgression, and he trusted that God might pardon him because it was his love for Italy which had carried him away. "But," he went on to say, "I have failed to appreciate the magnitude of my sin, for in my heart I have often gloried in it, and I still wear on my breast the Star of The Thousand." He passed the thin gold chain bearing the glorious token over his head and kissed it reverently, then he went on: "Delia, I entrust to your care this precious Star; take it and guard it, show it to the children God will send you, and teach them to sacrifice all for that ideal of which this Star is the symbol." Then Monsignore slipped the chain round Delia's neck. With flushed cheeks and glowing eyes the young woman looked proudly up to him, and more than by any spoken promise gave a solemn oath, which filled the old hero with profound consolation. He then spoke of his life, telling them of how for years, though doing his duty as he saw it, he had really groped in the dark, until God, in His infinite mercy, had vouchsafed to him two beacons to lead him on: one was the moral and material redemption of the peasants;



the other, the divulcation of the true meaning of Christ's message to humanity. In both he had failed through his vanity and over-confidence, and by the hatred and treason of those whose duty it was to sustain and encourage him; he freely pardoned them all, as he hoped for pardon himself, but to Guido he left the mission to protect and defend his name and his memory from the attacks of those who would try, even after he was gone, to besmirch and defame it. He had left his whole fortune to his nephew, and with it the request that he should assume his name and titles, so that young Guido Villarosa who was to be might complete the work left unfinished by old Guido Villarosa who was no more.

Then the young officer, moved to the very centre of his being, sprang impetuously to his feet, and with hand outstretched, cried out: "I swear it, Ziggio, I swear it! But I . . . I have not pardoned those vile murderers, Meravigli, Bredana, Baraldi, Sidoli, and the rest of them, nor that Church which——"

With irresistible majesty and sweetness Monsignore silenced him: "I have pardoned . . . I said. As to the Church, I know only of one, that of the Living Christ, which He created and wherein He reigns; the others, man-made, are



naught but the evanescent froth of circumstance, the result of the perishable agency of their founders, as changeable as the clouds, as insecure as broken reeds, imbued with all the weaknesses and crimes which flesh is heir to. Men, their ideas, their symbols, and their dogmas, have disappeared from before my eyes; now I can see only Jesus of Nazareth, my Master, and He alone is my Judge."

For a long moment there was a deep and reverent silence in the peaceful room, and the young couple felt that the spirit of Monsignore was soaring far above the present, in rapt contemplation of a divine and unexplained future. When he returned once more to earth he seemed stronger, and his voice came without effort. He again addressed the young couple, this time upon a subject which had direct connection with their marriage.

"My children," he said, "even after I had ceased opposing your union actively my mind was still laboring under the obscuring influence of an erroneous conception of what the essence of Christian matrimony must be. It was still the rite of the priest's blessing which constituted it, and in my blindness I could not see that it was not the handicraft of man which ennobled it to the sublimity of a Sacrament, but the direct



intromission of God, by whom souls are joined together, indissolubly. Now that my eyes have opened, I can fathom the desolate shallowness of our theology, which pretends to solve infallibly problems which need higher and purer laws than those written by man. But it is not sufficient that I should have labored in vain to combine my belief in dogma with the law of God, finding between them an abyss which grew ever wider; it is not sufficient that I should own to you, Delia, that the seed you had unknowingly sown in my soul ripened into a clearer knowledge of the mystery of life until that greater mystery towards which I am now drifting has perfected my knowledge of faith, of eternity, of God! I have perceived that the one Divine Ideal is the all-powerful, the all-conquering, the all-suffering love 'which casteth out all fear'! I now must bring my public testimony unto the world, aye, and unto the Church, and proclaim it, so as to fulfil my duty to the end. For this I have you here with me, and to-morrow, in the consecrated chapel of the episcopal villa, thrown open to all, I, a Bishop of a Church which considers the remarriage of divorced persons a blasphemous desecration and a lewd immorality, will solemnly invoke the blessing of the Almighty upon your heads!"



Exhausted, but his face alight with the enthusiasm of victory, he fell back upon his pillows, while Delia and Guido, moved to the very innermost sources of their beings, allowed their tears to flow unrestrainedly over the transparent hands upon the coverlet.

Strangely enough Monsignore was the first to regain control of his feelings and overcome his physical weakness. Perhaps he alone was fully conscious of how rapidly he was approaching the end of the toilsome journey, but the superb energy of his soul endowed him with a physical and moral power such as he had rarely enjoyed before. With a voice in which vibrated an unspeakable happiness he chided them for their tears:

"Wherefore these tears, my children? Now there is no reason for sorrow, but for great rejoicing. God in His infinite mercy has granted me a glimpse of the truth which is only fully comprehended in eternity, and I, a sinner, can proclaim solemnly His will upon earth by the one act of my existence which brings perfect, unclouded joy. So now you must smile and rejoice in my happiness. I will call Don Paolino and arrange all for to-morrow. Poor Paolino! He will be the most perplexed man on earth! What will he do when I am gone? I have left him to you, Delia, in my



will!" and Monsignore almost laughed aloud at his quaint conceit.

As Villarosa spoke he touched an electric button by his side, and Don Paolino came rushing upstairs double-quick, not only because the faithful fellow could not bear to be away a long time from his adored master's bedside, but also on account of the long-protracted interview between Monsignore and the newly arrived couple, which made him exceedingly anxious and intensely curious. But he certainly was not prepared either for the scene which met his eye or, still less, for what he was going to hear. The "young Contessa" was sitting by the bedside holding in both her hands that of Monsignore, and they were conversing in the most intimate and cheerful tones, while the "boy," leaning at the foot of the bed, mixed happily in the familiar conversation. And Monsignore? He hardly could recognise him—full of animation and of life, as if by a mysterious and sudden resurrection. The good secretary, perfectly nonplussed, stood helplessly amazed in the middle of the room until Monsignore called out to him:

"Paolino, my son, listen to my orders, and then hurry about them, because the time is short and you will have plenty to do. Prepare the



chapel to-night for a festive function which I will celebrate there to-morrow morning; fill it with all the flowers you can gather in our garden and in the Villa Meroni, for to-morrow I will celebrate a solemn Pontifical Mass, and impart God's Benediction upon my children."

The confusion in the mind of Don Paolino was so immense that for a while he looked as if he was going to have a fit, until Guido came to the rescue of his old friend, and explained in other words what his uncle meant. But the most beautiful trait of the peasant-priest's simple, elemental soul was a blind trust in whatever his master said upon matters of morals and faith, as if the words he uttered came as a direct inspiration from on high. Where health or the material interest of his master was concerned, it was quite different; he knew that he had a clear insight and more common-sense than any one else, and never hesitated therefore to speak out boldly. So, taking his courage in both hands, he explained with great energy to Guido that in the first place Monsignore could not be allowed to rise from his bed and fatigue himself by a Pontifical, and in the second, that a similar celebration would be disastrous "with that beast, Sidoli, on the watch, ready to report everything Monsignore did—down



there," and with tremendous signification he jerked his right thumb over his left shoulder.

Monsignore patiently allowed his faithful friend to exhaust his eloquence, then, softly but in a tone that rendered opposition impossible, he replied: "Paolina, this is my last disobedience to you. I am strong now, endowed with a strength that can never grow less; call Sandri, he will confirm my words. As to Rome, the Curia, and Sidoli, I know not of them, and even they can no longer injure me. So I will celebrate to-morrow morning and invoke the solemn blessing of the Almighty upon my children, whom He has united. I wish every one in the neighborhood to hear of the function, and early in the morning throw open the doors of the chapel, so that all may come. You, Paolino, will be my acolyte, but you are free to refuse if you fear the ire of Sidoli and prefer to keep on the safe side."

Then the hillman's spirit flamed up in Don Paolino, and he interrupted his master: "I leave you? I not be your acolyte? I afraid of that skunk, Sidoli? No, no, nor of all the Cardinals of Rome! Wherever Monsignor Guido Villarosa leads, poor Paolino Bosetti follows!" and he went up to the bed, knelt by it, and kissed Monsignore's hand. The act was so simple and so intrepid that



Delia could not hide her admiration, and expressed it in such terms that then and there the good secretary became her willing slave.

That same evening Sandri found his patient in a condition which a few hours before he would have thought absolutely unthinkable. He attributed it, of course, to a supreme display of Villarosa's force of will, and felt sure that, as soon as the artificial stimulus disappeared, the reaction would be even greater, if not fatal. If any one had suggested another explanation of this miraculous return to vitality and power, the good doctor would have shrugged his shoulders with profound scepticism; anyhow, when asked whether Monsignore might officiate for the special purpose of blessing Delia and Guido he did not demur, first because he saw how ardently his patient longed for it, and again what possible good would it have done to thwart him? But above all, it was the greatness of Monsignore's courage, the majesty of his resistance against the overwhelming power of Rome, the unswerving logic of his act which induced the doctor to give, even against his own medical judgment, this permission to rise as it were from a death-bed.

In these circumstances Don Paolino set every one to work in the villa to decorate the chapel,



and, although it was night, masses of flowers were gathered from the garden and from that of the Villa Meroni, roses, violets, and lilies of the valley, which were banked thick in every available nook and corner. The usually dark and silent episcopal villa was ablaze with light and resonant with the going and coming of many people, so that in a very short time all the neighborhood was informed of the ceremony which was going to take place next morning, and sooner than any one else, Sidoli heard of it, as he had his spies, always at work, even in the household of Monsignore itself.

No more glorious morning could have been desired than that which greeted Monsignore next day. He had passed a peaceful night, though not sleeping much, as the anticipation of the impending ceremony and the novel energy of which he was invested dispelled all possible drowsiness from his brain. Dr. Sandri, who had returned very early from Varese, declared with increasing astonishment that the heart action was normally strong and regular, and with Don Paolino assisted the Bishop in his toilet. Alone, and refusing any help, he wended his way downstairs to the little sacristy by the chapel, and there arrayed himself in the gorgeous stole and cope, heavily embroid-



ered in gold, preserved for the most solemn occasions; with the great jewelled mitre upon his flowing silver curls, crozier in hand, and preceded by Don Paolino, he entered the chapel, walked up the Altar steps, and in his strong and harmonious voice began the Mass: "*Introibo ad altarem Dei.*"

The Oratory was full to suffocation; a curiously mixed congregation called together by the curiosity of the unforeseen that might happen, shopkeepers, idlers, peasants, and two or three priests. Within the Altar rails side by side sat Delia and Guido, she radiantly beautiful in a simple white dress, he in his regimentals. It must have been a painful ordeal for the young couple as the crowd packed in the limited compass of the chapel stared at them in hostile astonishment, but at the same time they felt that their personality somehow did not count any longer, and that they were only the symbols of a great principle.

The Mass went on without incident, when just before consecrating the Bread and the Wine a slight gesture called the young couple to kneel together on the first step of the Altar, and Monsignore turned round and faced the congregation. Never had he looked more imposing; never more impressive sight could be imagined than the ascetic grandeur of that pale and wasted face,



now mystically refulgent with a light that was no longer of this world. His harmonious voice sounded in the absolute silence that now reigned, and every one of his words was heard with crystal-line distinctness: "O Lord, our God, Thou hast in Thy wisdom united by the bond of Thy imperishable love these Thy servants, Delia and Guido; now again I implore upon their heads all Thy blessings, that they may thrive, and, living according to Thy blessed rule, proclaim the infinite truth of our living Master, Jesus Christ. May the Almighty bless ye both, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." As he pronounced this blessing his hands rested softly upon those heads he loved so dearly, and he looked towards heaven with such a glorified expression of invincible faith upon his features that it seemed as if a Divine breath had passed over the little chapel and its hostile congregation. Then Monsignore finished the celebration of the Mass, but when he knelt at the Elevation he, for a moment, appeared unable to rise again. The race had been run, the effort achieved, and now Nature was reasserting her rights upon the flesh which the invincible spirit of the dying prelate had dominated till then victoriously.



Still Monsignore would not give in. Collecting in a supreme effort his rapidly failing strength, he pronounced clearly the final words of the Mass, and after the "*Ite, Missa est,*" descended from the Altar; but Guido and Delia could see that all the blood seemed to have left his face, that his lips were blue, and that his breath came by cruel sobs, hardly controlled by him in spite of his indomitable courage. As he passed by them he tottered ever so slightly, and in a flash they were by his side, helping him tenderly to the little sacristy where Sandri was waiting. Through a small side-window he had watched intently every motion of the old prelate's face, and he was prepared for what was bound to follow, knowing that the unavoidable end was near at hand, in spite of all he might attempt. But even in the sacristy Monsignore stubbornly fought against the mortal weakness now overcoming him. He removed his vestments, kissed tenderly Delia and Guido, then, almost as if it were the mere whim of a pampered invalid, asked that his "boy" should take him back to his room. The young man tenderly lifted that frail, wasted form, which did not weigh much more than that of a child, and rapidly carried his uncle upstairs. As he deposited his burden upon the bed all the strength left in Mon-



signore was exhausted, and he fell into a dead faint.

When Sidoli had been informed of what was going to take place in the chapel of the episcopal villa, just after the arrival in the household of a Roman Catholic Bishop of so unholy and depraved a creature as a divorced woman, he had been overcome by a furious outburst of maddened fanaticism, and had communicated by telephone and by telegraph with Meravigli, the Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan, and Cardinal Bredana in Rome. His furious denunciation of Villarosa's unheard-of and blasphemous conduct had fallen on ears only too anxious to gather anything against one whose complete ruin had been decided on in their minds ever since the first display of his methods and aims. But when the priests whom Sidoli had purposely sent to attend the ceremony returned and made their report, coloring it, of course, in such a way as they knew their employer desired, the Suffragan took the first available train and rushed to the Arcivescovato in Milan. Baraldi communicated immediately with Meravigli, who, nothing loath where his implacable thirst for vengeance was concerned, agreed to start that same afternoon for Rome and personally bring the whole case before the Curia, so that instant



and drastic measures should be taken with the smallest delay possible. The orders to act would be wired to Baraldi, and Sidoli would be informed at once. The fact that Villarosa's refusal to submit to the final decree of the Congregation of the Index had set in motion the Tribunal of the Holy Roman Inquisition greatly helped their plans, and there could be no possible doubt that the measures to be taken against the Bishop of Varese must be of extreme severity.

At Casbenno in the meanwhile, the condition of Monsignore was precarious in the extreme. Dr. Sandri had not hesitated to use the most energetic means to overcome the faintness before it degenerated into coma, and he had been so far successful that his patient had reacquired his senses and could breathe without anguish. However, he could not rest easily in a recumbent attitude, his arm-chair by the window in the study being the only place in which he appeared comfortable. The doctor had told the anxious watchers that all hope of prolonging Monsignore's life had disappeared, for the heart was ever losing its strength and must come fatally to a stop. As the chord of a harp under the touch of a Divine hand, it had vibrated with all its sweetness and power, and now the harmonic waves were



gently quieting down into the great silence of death.

Villarosa himself was perfectly aware that his remaining hours were but very few; for him death had no sting. Long before any one else he had perceived the gravity of his condition; he felt that the Reaper was steadily approaching, and hailed his coming as that of a long-desired friend. To him death was gain, the portal of life, the beacon which had guided his mind, groping in the bewildering darkness of a desolate night to the secure and peaceful haven of truth. So, with his fast ebbing strength he consoled and sustained his loved ones, especially poor Don Paolino, who now did not even attempt to hide his despair. The faithful fellow, with large tears rolling down his coarse and sallow cheeks, could not take his eyes away from his master's, and stood looking at him with an intensity of devotion which beautified his ugly face.

Delia and Guido never left the room, and it was Delia who rendered to him the loving services of a devoted daughter; of these he was never tired, her mere presence seeming to fill his soul with unalloyed happiness. This state of affairs lasted for two whole days; but on the morning of the third Monsignore's weakness was intensified,



and the doctor could hardly count the pulsations of the heart, but his mind was more than ever perfectly clear, and strangely his voice did not seem to have lost any of its sonority.

That same day Sidoli received a bulky message, carried to him by a member of Cardinal Baraldi's household; it was the long and anxiously expected sentence from Rome. The Suffragan opened it feverishly, and a glow of triumph shone in his eyes as he perused the lengthy parchment by which "one Guido Villarosa, priest" was suspended *a divinis* for sacrilege and blasphemous desecration of the Mass, and, furthermore, placed under the ban of the major excommunication for his criminal persistence in the heresies pointed out to him, with fatherly benevolence, by the supreme authority of the Pontiff. The document was over the signature of the Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, that of the President of the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition, and was countersigned by his Holiness himself.

This sentence was extraordinarily severe and far-reaching; for in one blow it deprived Monsignore, not only of all his rights and prerogatives as a Bishop, but even of the dignity of the priesthood, as if he had been guilty of the most terrible infringement of the moral law, and cast him de-



finitively out of any communion with the Church. To Sidoli it brought, apart from the satisfaction of his jealous hatred, the implied confirmation of his immediate succession to the actual dignity of Bishop of Varese, to take effect as soon as the condemnation had been notified to Villarosa. An official letter would have been sufficient; but the circumstance that a sentence of *excommunicatio major* might be proclaimed orally with due ceremonial, in presence of proper witnesses, gave him the double possibility of hounding his victim to the end, and of procuring his immediate ejection from the episcopal villa of Casbenno, where Sidoli thirsted to occupy his place. To that end, immediately after receiving the official sentence from Rome, together with two Canons of the Varese cathedral, his most devoted followers, whom he had conveniently instructed, he started in a carriage for Casbenno to fulfil the orders of the Curia.

At the villa in Casbenno, Monsignore, feeling his vitality ebbing away with increasing rapidity, had expressed the wish that the Curato of the parish should be summoned to administer the last rites of the Church. A messenger had been dispatched at once to Don Eusebio, and the harmless priest, whose blundering chatter had so often



amused Monsignore and his guests, did not lose an instant in obeying. The simple fellow had kept aloof from all participation in the struggles among the clergy of the diocese, but he was peculiarly situated, as all of the few inhabitants of the tiny village under his jurisdiction, and he, himself, were sincerely attached to the person of Villarosa, whose charity to those immediately around him was inexhaustible. So, down the steep and narrow path which led from the church on the top of the hill to the episcopal villa by the side of the lake, a little procession wended its way, while the bells of the church began to toll, according to the old Lombard fashion, two slow strokes of the bass, followed, at an interval, by two of the tenor. First came two boys in white surplices, one bearing a lighted censer, which he swung at intervals, the other the silver ampulla with the consecrated chrism of the Extreme Unction, then Don Eusebio in stole and cope, carrying solemnly with both hands the pyx containing the consecrated particle, and behind him the beadle lifting high over the head of the Curato a peculiar bell-shaped and wide umbrella of vivid red silk with embroideries and broad fringes of gold. As they went Don Eusebio and the beadle alternated their responses in a loud and nasal monotone, and the few people



they encountered on their way knelt devoutly as the Host passed by, and then followed with bowed heads. Reaching the villa, they entered, and through the house, thrown wide open, they ascended to the study, where all the servants were already congregated.

In his great arm-chair Monsignore sat in placid dignity, his bloodless face composed and irradiated by a divine expression of perfect peace; from time to time he bent his head slightly forward as if he were listening intently to a voice that he alone could hear, and a joyful smile of perfect comprehension lighted up his wasted features. Delia was kneeling by the side of the arm-chair with a restorative that she applied from time to time, always being rewarded by a loving glance. Dr. Sandri and Guido stood behind the chair, while Don Paolino, hardly containing his sobs, arranged the improvised altar for the coming Sacraments. Don Eusebio, as he entered the room, began at once the first words of the service, and all those present, excepting Guido and the doctor, knelt where they stood. When the celebrant removed from its receptacle the consecrated particle, nobody noticed the sound of a carriage, rapidly driven, nor the voices of several persons hurriedly ascending the stairs, so that when Don



Eusebio came to Monsignore's arm-chair, with the words "*Accipe Corpus Domini Nostri*," and was just going to depose the viaticum upon the lips of the dying Bishop, a loud voice, breaking rudely upon the deep silence, startled violently all those present.

It was Sidoli with his witnesses, who, finding the house deserted and no one there to thwart his plans, had rushed upstairs, knowing by the tolling of the church bell what must be going on. "Stop, Don Eusebio—stop! I, your Bishop, command you!" the triumphant priest cried at the top of his voice. "No shriving of heretics banned by the supreme authority of the Holy Pontiff!" Horror-stricken, and terrified, the poor Curato fell back in confusion, while simultaneously Guido, Sandri, and Don Paolino seemed disposed to fly at the throat of the intruder; but Monsignore had opened his eyes wide, and in a voice which seemed to come, clear and sonorous, from an incalculable distance, he quieted them imperiously, and then, addressing Sidoli, he interrogated: "What willest thou, who darest disturb my dying hour? Speak!"

The booming voice of Rome's executioner articulated with fierce joy each word in the sentence of the Inquisition; they fell in the solemn hush of



the death-chamber with a tremendous force. Villarosa listened, now keeping bolt upright in his arm-chair, as lifted up by a supernatural power. But nothing came to mar the august peace of his expression until Sidoli reached the last sentences, in which the bearer of the decree was empowered to accept the humble and tearful confession of the great sinner, justly stricken by the immanent justice of the Vicar of Christ; then the dying prelate smiled to himself, not in contempt, not in disdain, but with the superb comprehension of one to whom has been granted the full knowledge of life's meaning. Lifting his wasted hands, clasped together in a sublime gesture of thanksgiving, and with all his soul in his voice, Villarosa cried: "I have asked my God that I might appear before Him naked and humbled, and, behold! God hath granted my prayer. May His name be for ever blessed! I have relinquished my ensign of glory as a soldier of Italy, and Rome tears from my head the Bishop's mitre, and casts me outside its pale as a suspended priest, a heretic, and a recreant, to die unshriven and unblessed, so that now I present myself at the feet of my Saviour stripped of all the pomp and vanity of this world. But harken, Sidoli, and let those who sent thee harken. I appear to-day before our Almighty



Father to appeal from the sentence of His Vice-Regent! God will decide!"

Villarosa fell back upon his pillows; a glorious smile illumined his features and left upon them a radiancy which was not of this world. Monsignor Guido Villarosa, one-time soldier of "The Thousand" and Bishop of Varese, had presented his appeal to the Eternal Judge.

THE END



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Other authors have endeavored to portray the workings of a child's mind,—Tolstoi, in his *Souvenirs*, Dickens in *David Copperfield*, Pierre Loti, Daudet, Henry James,—but these have all written in later life, when the vividness of their own impressions has faded, and disillusion has laid its withering grasp upon them. They relate, as mature men, the story of infancy; André Lafon, a youth not long emerged from adolescence, who stepped straight from boyhood into the teaching profession, has never lost touch. He knows exactly what every type of schoolboy thinks and feels.















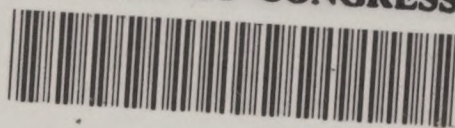








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